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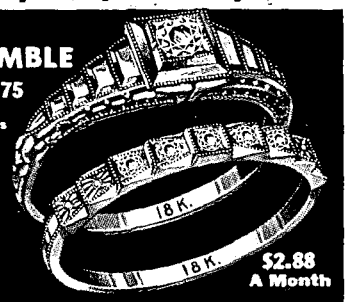

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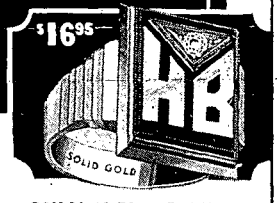

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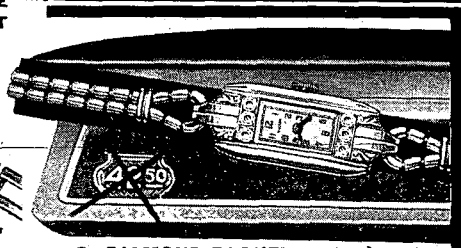

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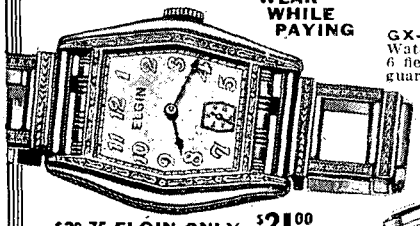

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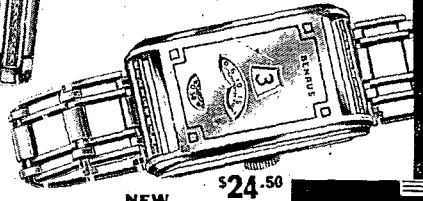

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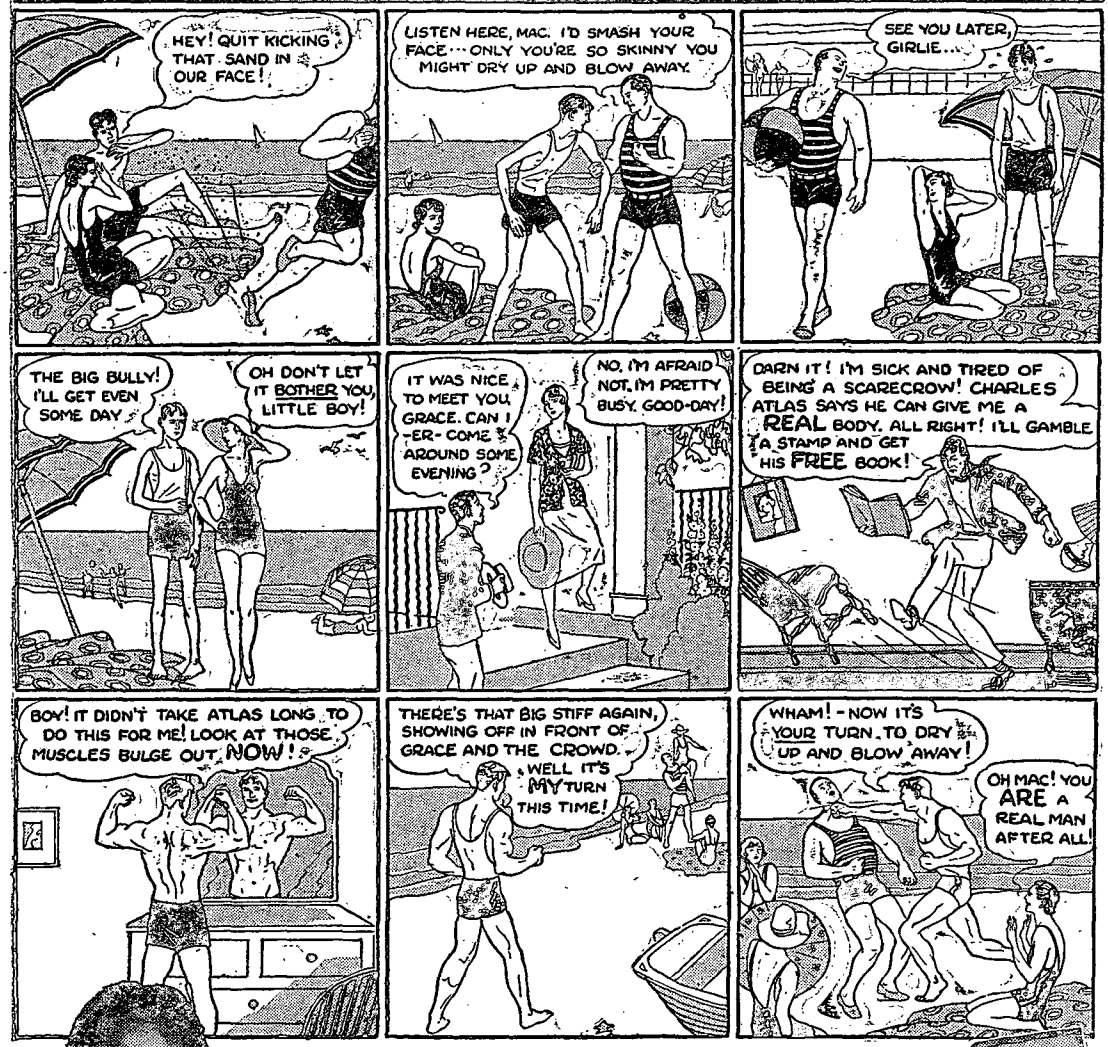

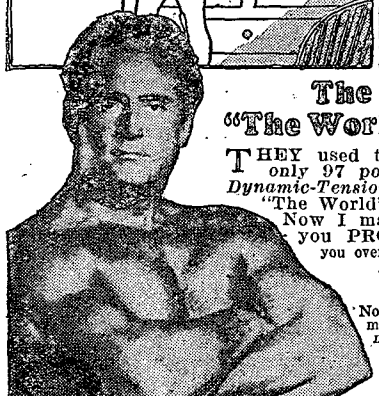

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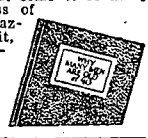

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TRAIL OF THE BROKEN TENT

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CHAPTER I.

THE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE.

EIGHT men were crowded into Mark Brent's cabin in the chill gray of dawn, facing toward the heater. Three perched buzzard-like on the bunk. Two sat on boxes, their moccasined feet extended. Homer Trask, a bearded giant, sprawled in one of the two hand-made chairs the cabin boasted, hugely at ease. Courtenay, the Englishman — still-faced, incomprehensible—occupied the other.

Mark himself stood beside the heater, his spare, lean-muscled body stooped a little, his boyish features set and glistening. He passed a shaking hand across his head and peered again about the intent circle. He knew each bearded and rough-hewn face about him. He had worked and drunk with these men, sweated and starved. He knew how they played their hands at poker, their caliber on the trail, their

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largeness of heart or meanness of soul.

But in this moment, because of something portentous throbbing in the very air, it was as though he stood in the presence of strangers.

"It's a committee of the whole, Mark, my boy," said Trask. Either through vote of the camp, or because he had assumed that authority, the big man was spokesman. "Get set for a few questions."

"You may answer them frankly, Brent," put in Courtenay. "You're among friends, you know. All we want is a complete picture of what happened last night."

Mark eyed him fixedly, striving to recall the events of the preceding crowded night. Some details were clear, others vague. He searched those chaotic images for a clew that would explain the gathering of this tribunal. No minor infraction of camp rules, he knew, was responsible for it. It was something deeper.

In so far as he could remember it, the record revealed nothing unusual. The first blizzard of the season had rolled down from the Endicotts the day before, to burst in ungoverned fury across the Yukon basin. Work on the diggings had ceased, as it would remain suspended until the spring. Those who purposed to "hole in" at Circle City—the metropolis of the Yukon in the pre-Klondike era—had long since departed, forewarned by the message riding down with the wind. These eight had been left behind, separated from the remote, sunlit Outside—the iron jaws of winter having closed upon the North.

As at many lonely camps in the wilderness, the seven months' season of "the long cold" had been ushered in by an uproarious party. He, Mark, was not a drinking man, but it had been his turn to "set 'em up." He had accordingly invited in the camp, provided two demijohns of Hudson Bay "squareface," and acted as host to the ensuing festivities.

The squareface had flowed freely while the stout walls shook to the impact of the storm. The red-bellied heater had roared defiance to the cold and dark. The air had been thick and blue with smoke, unsanitarily and gorgeously warm. The swirling desolation beyond the walls, the moan of the barrens droning by overhead, the snarling of wolf dogs beneath the floor, wrestling with disordered dreams—these things, so it seemed, had served merely to emphasize the comradeship and security within. What though another winter was thundering at the door, that forces making for death were abroad in the arctic night? After all, they were eight.

Thus into the small hours the brawl had run its course. One by one the eight had succumbed, snoring. He, Mark, and two others were the last on their feet. They had boasted of this, he recalled vaguely. It was vague indeed, for here the sequence of images was blurred and indistinct. He and Trask and Courtenay, it had been. Then Courtenay was down, slumped in his chair. Had he and Trask stood together at the open door? Was there—or was there not—a smoking rifle in his hand?

He glanced toward the equipment-festooned wall, licking his lips. His rifle was not on the rack. It stood in the corner beside the door. Two empty shells lay hard beside the threshold, gleaming dully in the shadow. It was as though suddenly a chill wind breathed upon his back. What was it Trask had said, shaking his arm, his bearded face thrust

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close—"Man, you've downed him! He's done for!"

Downed whom? He rubbed his eyes and scanned each face anew. All seven were here. There had been only eight in Birch Creek. Yet there the rifle stood, and there lay the empty shells.

"All set?" queried Trask. Leaning back, the giant's thumbs were hooked in his belt. His eyes were ferocious and intent beneath knitted brows.

"Shoot," said Mark between his teeth. He braced his legs beneath him to keep his knees from shaking. Mentally he laid hold on all his resources to withstand the impact of what was here and now to be revealed.

"Just tell us then," said Trask, "what you remember about last night."

"Nothing much," said Mark huskily. "It was a brawl. I postponed my heavy drinking to the last. You and I were left—and Courtenay. Then Court was out, glassy-eyed. Sitting in that chair you're in." He pressed bony knuckles against his throbbing temples. "Seems like we were standing at the door, and——"

"Who?" interposed Courtenay.

"Trask and I."

"Wait," said one of those on the bunk. "This ain't fair, boys. It isn't according to the rules. Mark's entitled to know what he's up against. If he wants to forget, that's his business. We ain't forcing him to admit nothing. Tell your story, Trask."

"First," Mark pleaded, "tell me what happened."

"I'll tell him," said Trask. "You'll recall, Mark, early in the evening, that we were discussing this fellow Corliss, the deputy marshal who's been hanging around Circle. We were joking about whether or not he'd be heading for Birch Creek as soon as the storm blew over. Looking for somebody, you understand; and which one of us was he after? It might be me. It might be you. The eight of us haven't been wintering at Birch Creek because we like the scenery. I'm Trask. You're Brent. There's Courtenay. Yonder's Shorty McPherson, and Geroux, and the rest of the boys. But who were we before we buried ourselves in the North? We ain't saying. But here's this deputy marshal——"

"Speed it up," growled "Shorty," the man who had spoken before from the bunk. "No—I'll tell him. Corliss didn't wait until to-day, Mark. He evidently mushed out from Circle before the storm hit him. He blew in last night. The blizzard was over when he made it to camp. Clear and cold, you savvy. How did we know? Because there was no snow on his body."

"His body?" echoed Mark.

"He was shot," said Shorty, "just outside the door. The first bullet got him clean. The second was fired after he was down. We could tell from the angle. He was laying there this morning, beside the sled. The dogs had chawed loose and holed in."

"For the man who was drunk," said the reckless Geroux, "it was—w'at you call?—the bull's-eye."

"The question is," said Courtenay in his unemotional way, "who killed Corliss? Trask says it was you."

"I don't say that," the big man instantly denied.

"What then?"

"I say that I was standing by the table, pouring out another slug." Trask indicated his position with a jerk of the thumb. "Mark was yon-

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der. There came an ungodly hullabaloo among the dogs, and Mark stepped to the door. 'Let 'em wrangle,' I says, thinking it was a dog fight. Next thing I heard the rifle. I staggered over, and here came another shot. Mark was working the lever, pushing in another shell. I grabbed his arm and looked out. There was Corliss, face down. Mark put the rifle in the corner and kicked the door shut. 'It wasn't a dog fight,' says he. 'It was a wolf.'" The big man shuddered. "So we poured us another drink."

"A vivid picture," said Courtenay with a thin smile. "And still you don't *say*, of course——"

"That's enough, boys," said Mark. "Don't argue. I remember Trask grabbing my arm. The rifle was still smoking." He spread his hands. "I did it. I don't know why."

THERE was a momentary silence, during which the moan of the wind seemed unnaturally loud about the eaves. Then Courtenay, with a keen glance at Mark's face, arose and gave him his chair. Mark slumped, his head on his chest. Trask relaxed with an explosive sigh.

"And that's that," said he. He ran his fingers through his shaggy hair with a gesture of huge relief. "Mark, my boy, I feel sorry for you. At the same time, it's a load off my shoulders. It's been mighty tough on me to have the camp halfway believing——"

"Bah!" growled the hard-bitten Shorty. "You're no plaster saint, Trask. You could carry the load. Mark here's in this jack pot only because he was drunk and didn't know what he was doing. Outside of that he's a trail eater and a square shooter. Don't you set there and try to sprout wings and twang a harp. You're not talking to strangers."

"What do you mean?" demanded Trask, his ferocious brows lowering.

"You know what I mean," said Shorty. "Didn't you have a partner once up on the Stewart?"

"And w'at about the Nation River?" said Geroux softly. "Dose Indian, w'en you have stolen his squaw——"

Trask leaped up with a bellowed oath. All seated men in the room, with the exception of Mark, drew their feet beneath them, rocking forward a little. Courtenay raised a restraining hand.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," he reproved. "Our nerves are on edge, and all that. But these—er—personalities are beside the point. Postpone them, if you please. We have pressing business before the committee. Sit down, Trask!"

The giant subsided, muttering. He glared at Shorty, who grinned, replacing his pipe between his teeth.

Courtenay opened the heater and thrust in more fuel. Momentarily his thin-lipped, aristocratic features were redly illumined, as were Mark's behind him. Their shadows were huge and grotesque against the dark walls. He kicked the door shut and dusted his hands.

"The question is," said he, his unemotional gaze resting on Trask, "how shall we proceed?"

CHAPTER II.

ADVICE OF A FRIEND.

TRASK immediately assumed the leadership again, swallowing his late rage. He peered about the circle, scanning each face. "Just to prove to you lobos that my heart's in the right place," said he, "I'll give you my

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idea. You can take it or leave it lay. We've got a prisoner here. He's admitted a killing. The corpse is over in an empty shack, ready to be freighted to Circle. According to all the rules of law-abiding camps, it's up to us to deliver Mark at Circle at the same time and send for the commissioner at Eagle to take charge of 'em both. But Mark here is no ordinary prisoner. We know him. We've worked in the same diggings and eaten the same beans. I don't give a hoot what his past was before he came into this blasted wilderness. He's been a trail eater here in the Yukon, an upstanding young feller me lad, clean as a hound's tooth. So I'm for giving him a chance."

"You're talking like a white man, at that," Shorty conceded. "I dunno why. What chance?"

Courtenay had withdrawn a little into the shadow, so all could have an unobstructed view of Mark. The latter sat immobile, trembling no longer. His face had aged during the past moments. He appeared to be disinterested, though his life depended upon the outcome of these casual proceedings. His eyes were fixed unseeingly upon the glowing hearth.

"If we take him to Circle," said Trask, "he's sunk. John Law's got him. They take him down to Haines and hang him. Instead, we give him the best dog team in camp. He takes equipment for the trail. He starts for Circle, and lays in plenty grub for a long haul. We give him a day's start, then follow with this corpse. After the shooting, we report, Mark makes a fast get-away. We tried to overhaul him. Being a trail eater, he outrun us."

"But from Circle City," said Geroux, "w'ere does he go then?"

Trask shrugged his shoulders. "That's his business. One thing there's plenty of in the North is room."

"He can't go upriver," Shorty pointed out. "The Mounties would hold him on suspicion at Forty Mile till they found out why he was heading Outside in such a hurry. He can't go downriver. There's nothing there, no chance to catch a boat at tidewater. They'd run him down long before he reached the flats. There's plenty mushers at Circle who are spoiling for a little excitement. Bushwhacking a marshal, drunk or not, would give them reason enough. Excuse it, Mark. I'm just calling the cards as the world will see it, outside of Birch Creek."

" 'Sall right," said Mark. "You've called it."

"Personally," said Trask, "if I was Mark, I'd *start* upriver. But I'd turn off at the first broken trail, heading east. Make for the pass and on up to the Porcupine. Bear toward the Divide. I'd be down in the Mackenzie by spring."

Men looked at each other, their faces bleak and impassive. The emotional Geroux shivered a little. Trask had named the toughest trail of a continent—the midwinter crossing of the frowning Rockies, the iron barrier between the Yukon and the Mackenzie.

"You would, eh?" said Shorty.

"Let him winter with the Ileuts and make a spring crossing, then," said Trask, scowling. "He savvies their lingo. He knows them Indians. Let him pick his own trail. Let him head upriver or down. You asked me. I'm giving him my best idea. It's up to him. He stands on his own legs. Giving him a dog team, equipment, and a day's start, is as far as we can go."

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It was true. Men of experience would know that Mark could not actually have escaped unless the camp so decreed. The point would probably never be officially raised. It was the way of the camps, and nothing could be proved. But having permitted him that much, the rest was up to Mark himself.

"How about it, Mark?" said Courtenay.

Mark looked about him slowly. That he had been following the discussion, and had at the same time permitted his thoughts to range far afield, was plain. His haggard eyes were puzzled.

"What gets me," said he, "is why I should shoot Corliss, even when I was drunk. I didn't have anything against him. He was an officer of the law. I knew they'd come for me sooner or later. No matter where I hid. I had never planned to resist——"

"Never mind about that now," cut in Trask bluntly. "You'll have plenty of time to ponder those mysteries. On the trail. The question is, do you want to make a run for it? If you're going, you'll have to go quick. Every minute counts. A day's start is none too much."

Mark looked at him for a space in silence. His gaze looked farther, beyond the giant and the walls at his back, at bleak horizons.

"I suppose so," said he at length. "It's my only chance at life. Such as it is," he added. "Whatever it's worth."

"Fine," said Trask heartily. He arose. The others followed suit. "Get packed, then, Mark, my boy. What dogs do you want?"

"I'll take my own; I know them. They're as good as most. I've got plenty of equipment, also."

"Plenty of dust for grub?" asked Shorty, blinking.

"Plenty. Much obliged, boys."

Trask stood aside, allowing the others to file forth. Courtenay was the last in line, preceding the giant. The latter spoke over his shoulder.

"Don't forget to clean your rifle before you pack it," said he.

"Thanks, Trask," Mark returned. "Shut the door after you, please."

FOR a long time after the others had gone, Mark sat immobile, his gaze fixed upon the glowing hearth. There was an insistent need for haste, to be up and doing, to pack and be on his way. A long trail lay ahead. It extended into the snow-covered vastness beyond Circle, on up the Porcupine, beyond the mighty ramparts of the Rockies. The Mackenzie awaited there. After that the barrens. And it was time to go.

Still he sat slumped, his legs extended toward the fire whose warmth he did not feel, his thumbs hooked in his belt.

His gaze strayed to the rifle, in the corner beside the door. He arose presently, crossed to the weapon and picked it up. The metal was searingly cold, proof enough of the temperature that was aboard beyond the walls. He opened the door and glanced out.

The camp was familiar, yet strange. The cabins, closely grouped, were all but buried in drifts. Trails were worn to each. Smoke poured from many chimneys. The forty-odd dogs of camp—Huskies, Mackenzies, wolfish malemutes—ranged hither and yon, hopefully snuffling for lost fragments of food, snarling and snapping among themselves.

Close at hand, less than ten paces from the doorway, an abandoned sled stood. The equipment had not been unloaded from it. Fragments

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of broken harness surmounted the lashed tarpaulin. All about this sled the snow was beaten down, where curious dogs had circled it in the night. Beside it, fresh snow had been thrown and scattered about. This, in turn, was trampled smooth, so that no stain of crimson showed.

Mark turned away and closed the door. He returned to the table, rifle in hand. He seated himself, the butt of the weapon resting on the floor between his moccasined feet. Automatically, in the business of cleaning it, he pulled down the lever to make sure the rifle was empty. A shell was in the chamber. He did not actually eject it. Instead, under the impact of a thought that crowded back his sickness of heart, he thrust the shell home again, leaving the hammer back.

He returned the butt to the floor, between his feet, and sat, considering. His senses were clear and poised again, his thought processes emerging from chaos. It was a long way up the Porcupine to the Mackenzie and the Barrens. Cold, darkness, and solitude would line that trail. There would be days of toil and nights of waking. Haunting memories of the past would stride shoulder to shoulder with him by day. Strange whispers would come down with the wind in the long night. It would be a bitter haul, and to what end?

He had a choice, after all. Close at hand another trail beckoned. It was unexplored, but he did not fear that. He had set his face into the wilderness before. Neither hunger, nor cold, nor poignant regret could accompany him there along that other trail.

A knock resounded at the door. He had just time to lower the hammer softly and lean the rifle against the wall when Courtenay entered.

The Englishman's unemotional gaze flitted from Mark to the rifle. He nodded, coming forward to the heater.

"I thought so. Pardon, Mark, for bursting in on you like this. But I caught Trask's last remark, you know. It occurred to me that it might be—er—suggestive."

"Court," said Mark. "I can talk to you. There aren't many." He gestured toward the rifle. "Why not?"

THE smoking of a cigarette, in that day and year along the Yukon, was considered a mark of weakness. Courtenay, among those who knew him, was excepted from such suspicion. He lighted a cigarette now.

"I asked myself that question once, Brent," said he. "I was a subaltern in Rhodesia. Along the Transvaal border. Boer insurgents were making things unpleasant. In the charge on a kraal, my best friend was shot from the saddle beside me. In the mêlée I lost the reins, and my horse lost his head. He turned back. My detachment followed me. The record showed that I had led the retreat. You can guess the rest, Brent, if you know the British tradition. Cashiered. Sent home in disgrace. My family didn't know me. They never shall. I must stay five thousand miles away from England."

He blew a cloud of smoke upward and examined it quizzically.

"I may say, Brent, that I'd rather have died a hundred times. Still"—he gestured mutely—"I'm here."

Such a confession had never before crossed Courtenay's lips, Mark was sure. He studied the other, his own terrific dilemma temporarily in the background.

"Life is like that," continued

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Courtenay. "There's always a haven farther on. New prospects. New interests. No doubt you've felt low in spirit on other occasions before you came to the Yukon. Still, you found sanctuary here at Birch Creek. You must leave now, but who knows what's waiting beyond the mountains?" He smiled suddenly. It was like sunlight on a glacial cliff. "Don't brood over this unfortunate episode, Mark, old man. It was written in the cards. May I ask a question?"

"Of course."

"Tell me, then," said Courtenay, "why you came to the Yukon? When you leave here your past is behind you, you know."

"Again," Mark agreed. "I left it once before. Yes, I'll tell you. I was broke in Seattle six years ago. I signed on as a seaman on a whaler. At Dutch Harbor the skipper told us we were heading for the Priboloffs. Fur seals. Bigger money than looking for whales. We would all get a split. How about it?

"We were a green crew, you understand. I personally didn't know that it was a *poaching* expedition, that the Priboloffs were closed. I suspected it first when the cutter *Bear* came up in the fog and we ran for it. It was too late then. He had a full cargo of skins below decks. It meant a Federal penitentiary for us all. The *Bear* chased us eight hundred miles across the Behring. Mostly in the fog. The skipper ran us aground on the delta. There was a running fight. Three of the cutter's crew were killed, I understand. I wasn't armed myself. We scattered in the tundra, each man for himself. I made it to Ingook three weeks later."

"My word!" Courtenay breathed. "What equipment?"

"My knife," said Mark. "And matches." He grinned feebly. "I was green when I started across the delta. I was an old-timer when I reached Ingook. It was in early spring. I came up to Circle on the *Alice* on her first trip. Cutting wood. I never went out."

"I see," said Courtenay. "Ignorance is no excuse at law, is that it?"

"And Federal indictments never die," said Mark.

"Hm-m-m," said Courtenay. Having smiled once, his face was frozen again into inscrutable lines. But his eyes twinkled. "Tut, tut, Mark, old man! If you ever feel like reaching for your rifle *again*, remember that incredible trek to Ingook. Three hundred miles across the delta in three weeks. With a knife and matches. Some inner urge kept you on your feet. It hasn't died yet."

"But I had hope then," Mark pointed out. "Where is it now?"

"It's there," said Courtenay. "You shall always have hope. In spite of circumstances and fate itself. Why? Because we're fighting animals, you and I. You'll carry on. You haven't spent five winters in this bitter but stirring region not to have absorbed its creed. One plays the game to the end. To the last chip."

Not the philosophy he exponded so much as the quiet magnetic force of the man drew Mark past an inner, grim crossroads. Forgotten reserves of courage stirred within him sluggishly.

"You'll clean your rifle, as Trask suggested in such thoughtful fashion," said Courtenay. "You'll pack it and your equipment. You'll take your chance as it's offered and trust to the luck of the trail. Right?"

"Right," said Mark.

He arose and stood, somewhat unsteadily. He shook his head once,

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and again, as though to clear cobwebs from his brain. He extended his hand. Courtenay gripped it silently, then moved to the door. He opened it, but did not stride forth. Instead, after a quick glance to right and left, he beckoned Mark closer.

"Don't cross the Divide," said he. "Winter on the upper Porcupine. It's a big country. You're as safe there as anywhere. Keep within striking distance of the Yukon. Don't brood over this unfortunate business last night."

They stood eye to eye. In these parting words, Mark knew, the other was also attempting to smooth the lonely trail ahead.

"It's the advice of a friend," said Courtenay. "Remember it. Follow it implicity. Stay in the Yukon. Don't brood over the death of Corliss. Understand?"

"It's easier said than done," said Mark. "I'll try."

"Cheerio, then." Courtenay drew his parka closer about him. "Good hunting. I trust we'll meet again."

CHAPTER III.

THE CHECHAHCO.

JUST as all trails in the Yukon led to Circle City, so all beaten paths in the frontier metropolis itself led to McQuestion's, the headquarters of the N. A. T. & T. Co., and the social center of uncounted square miles of wilderness. It was a world within a world, where all the luxuries and pastimes of a primitive region could be purchased at a price; where no questions accompanied the buying and the medium of exchange was raw gold.

Mark pulled in at dusk. His tired dogs immediately lay down in the well-trampled snow, their breath rising frostily in the chill air. Mark left them there and strode into the commissary wing of the great, log-walled building.

Later in the season his arrival would have caused quite a stir among dogs and men. The hundreds of wolfish animals abroad in camp would have pounced exultantly upon the newcomers, eager to test their mettle. Men would have grouped about Mark, hungry for gossip concerning the "hermits of Birch Creek," trail conditions, dog fights, poker games—anything new or interesting that would provide food for talk during endless, dragging hours.

But winter was not far enough advanced as yet for this quality of interest. The battle for supremacy still raged among the dogs already in camp; the new arrivals must wait their turn. The fourscore adventurers who had converged from all points of the compass a week before were still engaged in profitless but soul-satisfying pursuits that had haunted lonely dreams in the waste places. The hungry were being fed, the pangs of the thirsty soothed. Gamblers were waging a desperate play, and the dance hall was already crowded. From end to end the huge, rambling structure was ablaze with light.

Men spoke to Mark jovially, according to the custom of the region, and hurried on. It was carelessly assumed that he would spend the night in camp; they would see him around. Why not? Circle City was the end of the trail. It was a long winter, moreover; there was plenty of time.

This suited Mark perfectly. He planned to enter and depart as unobtrusively as possible, scattering just enough information behind him, for those who inquired, to cover his tracks.

The great McQuestion himself

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waited on Mark at the counter. The man who left his name imprinted forever upon a stirring frontier epoch was tall and gaunt, crag-like of jaw and brow. His deep-set eyes were kindly.

MARK was thankful that no one else was present in the storeroom at the moment. One force abroad in the Yukon, he knew, transcended all else. It was gold. The fact that he was not buying a few staples in large quantities, obviously designed to replenish the stores of a winter camp, but was carefully selecting a complete grubstake, would instantly have arrested attention. Within the hour, about camp would be a rumor of a new strike.

But McQuestion could be trusted to give the exact impression that he, Mark, wished to leave behind. The great one might suspect otherwise, but outstanding among his characteristics was the ability to keep his own counsel. And McQuestion had given Mark his first grubstake when he had stepped off the *Alice* that bitter spring day six years before.

"I'm going upriver, Mac," said he, striving to put the exultance in his voice that the occasion demanded. "Clear over the hump. Outside."

"Fine, laddie," said McQuestion. He placed a sack of salt, in a waterproof container, on the counter. "Great. But ye'll be back. There's something aboot the North."

Mark shook his head. "Once I make it to tidewater, I'll never come back. I've frozen and starved enough."

This, too, was the usual statement of those who faced, in spirit, toward the sunshine. McQuestion made no comment upon it.

"A man left here this morning," said he. "A chechahco. He's been around the post since the last boat, waiting for snow. He said he was heading for Forty Mile. I doubt, though, that he turned east not many miles up. What else, laddie?"

Mark named the next item on his list, his heart leaping. How much McQuestion knew about his, Mark's affairs, could only be surmised. No man could read the great one's thoughts or fathom his knowledge. But the information he had just imparted was significant, as he had intended it to be. His words had been few. They had conveyed a larger picture.

A chechahco—an inexperienced one—had come in on the last boat. He had stayed close in camp, awaiting winter trail conditions. With the first snow he had headed upriver. For reasons unnamed, McQuestion was sure that his true destination was the interior, toward the Porcupine. Since there were no winter camps in the vastness of the Porcupine basin, except for isolated and remote Indian villages, this could mean but one thing. The stranger, like himself, was a wanted man.

He clutched at this thought exultantly. There was a chance—remote, but well within the realm of possibility—that he could overhaul this stranger. If so, he would not be alone in the solitude of those tremendous wastes. Whatever his race, creed, or past, the other would be company of sorts. Their trails, fleeing from justice, would lie together.

"What sort of a chap was he, Mac," he inquired casually, "this chechahco?"

"About your age and heft, I should say," returned McQuestion. "A solemn-faced laddie. I doubt if he'll be a chechahco long."

McQuestion helped him load and

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pack his supplies. The lashing down of tarpaulins, making ready for the trail, aroused no curiosity. It was assumed by passers-by that Mark was merely getting all in readiness for his return trip to Birch Creek on the morrow.

It was when he was ready to start that the great one put the question against which Mark had steeled himself from the first.

"You saw Corliss, no doubt," said he. "When will he be coming back?"

"To-morrow," said Mark. "He laid over in camp a day."

He knew that had McQuestion even remotely suspected what had happened at Birch Creek, he would never have been permitted to leave Circle City, past friendship or no. In matters of justice the leader of men invariably hewed to the line. Mark knew, also, with a return of his old sickness of heart, that McQuestion would never again beam upon him in this kindly fashion, his somber eyes twinkling. Should their paths pass again, the craglike face before him would be as harsh as mountain rock, and as unyielding.

"Good luck, laddie," said he, "on your trail upriver."

MARK sped over the ice in the gathering dusk. Behind him the lights of Circle City faded. Had it not been for the information McQuestion had given him, this twilight interval would have proved an acid test to his inner stamina. Those twinkling lights—dwindling, fading in the rear—would have represented his last human contacts for months and years—perhaps forever.

But a pitiful solace had been left to him. One trail, at least, if McQuestion's surmise was correct, led into the desolation that extended from the left bank of the Yukon to the trackless arctic. Could he but overhaul this lone wanderer before he penetrated too far into the wastes, a united stand could be made against the all but unconquerable forces of cold and dark.

His dogs were tired. Yet they forged on at command, strengthened by prospect of food at the end of the haul. Mark slowed his pace more and more as darkness deepened. By the light of the flaming stars, he scanned the left bank in passing.

He decided, presently, to make camp. The light was too dim to risk the possibility of missing the trail. It was risky business, he knew, to halt beside the main winter highway that connected Circle City with upriver posts. But by pulling off into one of the many sheltered coves that pierced the bank of the mighty river, and making a cold camp this first night, he was reasonably safe.

He fed his dogs, ate sparingly himself, rolled up immediately in his blankets. He had feared this first night, alone with his thoughts beneath the flaming majesty of the stars. Yet his very weariness was a blessing. He had traveled furiously and far that day. Some of it had been heavy trail work, breaking a way through new drifts. On good stretches he had jogged, Indian fashion, behind the creaking sled. Physically exhausted now, he fell swiftly into dreamless sleep.

He was up with the first gray hint of dawn. He assembled his equipment and pushed forth again upon the broad bosom of the river. The sky was clear, the air bitterly cold. In the shelter of the left bank he was protected from the wind, but a moaning overhead told of frigid tides rolling down from the north.

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He knew it was unlikely that travelers would be abroad at this hour, heading upriver or down. He concentrated solely, therefore, upon the trail he sought.

He came upon it at near noon. Until he saw the narrow pathway formed by sled and dogs, angling to the left up a broad gulch that led to the benches, he had not realized how eager had been his hope that McQuestion's surmise would prove to be right. Here, he knew exultantly, was proof enough. No other but the stranger would have an excuse for bearing north from the main trail.

It was like a new lease on life. He swung his dogs into the narrow pathway almost with delight. The stranger was but a day ahead. He must break trail as he went, while he, Mark, could follow more swiftly over the trail thus broken. By the second night—perhaps even the following night, they should be making camp together.

He grinned involuntarily as he visualized their probable meeting. The other would instantly assume, when he first glimpsed Mark at his rear, that he was being pursued. It would be the first thought to leap into the mind of a wanted man. He would make strenuous efforts to escape. When this proved vain, he would make a stand, prepared to resist to the end. Considerable and persuasive eloquence would have to be brought into play to convince him that he, Mark, was tarred with the same brush, that he desired merely to join their forces together.

Yet it could be done, he was sure. The stranger, like himself, was lonely and afraid, recoiling in spirit from the desolation ahead. Their interests were alike. They were members in an unchartered brotherhood.

HAVING once achieved the benches, Mark was forced to revise his first estimate of the speed with which the other could be overhauled. Ridges had been swept clean by the driving wind, leaving adjacent areas of hard-packed snow in which little trail breaking had been necessary. For miles and miles this terrain stretched. The stranger, provided that his dogs were good—and they were good, it was plain from the sagacious manner in which they chose the likeliest way—could make a speed almost equal to his own. It was only in the turbulent country beyond the benches, where the heavy trail work would start, that the other would begin to fall back.

In mid-afternoon he came upon the stranger's first night camp. A tolerant smile tugged at his lips as he studied the sign. With experienced dogs, on a straight-away haul, the inexperience of the musher himself could easily be hidden. But here the marks of the chechahco were plain.

The site he had selected, beside a tiny stream, was in the open, exposed to the full force of the wind.

MARK BRENT

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He had first attempted to build a fire upon the snow itself; later he had scraped the snow aside and had been successful. He had chopped a hole for water where the ice was thickest. He had been unaware that the sled must be broken out before starting in the morning; the dogs themselves, swinging this way and that, had done the trick.

Pondering these mute but eloquent clews, Mark marveled at the mysterious urge that could send such an experienced one so blithely into the hostile wilds. That the stranger was a man of determination was evident enough. He, Mark, was prepared through bitter training for this assault upon the barrens. He knew all the tricks of the trail. Even so, he shrank from it in spirit. How much greater, then, must have been the inner qualms of this downright chechahco? Plainly enough, as McQuestion had said, he would not be a chechahco long.

When he made camp himself that night, Mark was troubled by a new problem concerning the stranger. There was only one generally used pass to the Porcupine from the Circle City region. It had been labeled "Bonnet Plume" by the early Hudson Bay traders, and was the shortest and most direct route. There was, in fact, another pass farther east, known only to the Indians and a handful of old-timers. Because of a craterlike pinnacle guarding this hidden cleft, it was called, in the Ileut languauge, "The-Way-of-the-Broken-Tent."

But why should a chechahco—unless his plunge into the wilds had been absolutely without preparation and he was merely forging on at random—be bearing toward Broken Tent? His was not a randam trail, Mark was sure. It lay too consistently north and east—undeviating, in fact, except for the necessities of the terrain. But who could have told him of the Indian pass?

In the depths of the night a new storm rolled down in fury from the north. It came in blizzard gusts that screamed by overhead, moaned in distant crags. The snow drifted high against Mark's windbreak, covered over the sled and the sleeping dogs. He huddled in his blankets, his heart sinking. He was warm and protected. The blizzard in itself meant nothing. But where was the stranger's trail now?

HIS worst fears were realized when he broke camp in the morning. The brief burst of the storm had spent itself. Again the sky was clear, the air still, crystalline, ominous with impending deeps of cold. All sign of the stranger's passing had been obliterated utterly and forever from the snowy vastness of the land.

Nevertheless, Mark determined to push on. Far ahead, as one peak of many in the iron barrier that guarded the Porcupine, was Broken Tent. If the stranger was actually heading for the Indian pass, he could yet be overtaken. Only a few hours separated them now. With good luck he could find the other's trail again emerging from the previous night's snow.

By nightfall this latter hope had fled. He should have picked up the trail long since. But one chance was now left—that both were forging toward the pass along parallel courses. If the other had been proceeding merely at random, and had turned to right or left, their trails would never cross.

He made camp in bitter cold. Hour by hour, during the brief span of daylight, the temperature had fallen. The furry armor of his male-

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mutes was erect, their slanting eyes rimmed with frost. Even the leaping flames seemed to impart no warmth.

In the blackness of the small hours there was a disturbance among the dogs. Throaty snarls burst forth, a menace and a challenge. Mark peered out from his blankets, his rifle projecting beside him. He could see nothing unusual at first in the starlit gloom. Then, on a ridge above camp, he saw a dark form slink by. Another followed, and another; a ghostly column that faded silently into the night.

Wolves, he told himself with a sigh of relief, sinking back. Already, with winter barely begun, the hunters of the barrens were coming down from the wilds. He smiled bitterly in the darkness as he snuggled deeper in the protecting blankets. He had been glad that they were wolves, and not men.

In the terrific cold of dawn, before facing again toward the pass, curiosity took him up to the crest of the ridge. It was too early for wolves, after all. Had he dreamed that he had seen those ghostly shapes against the stars?

What he saw sent him back to his team in frenzied leaps. He finished packing his equipment with mittened hands that trembled, and harried his dogs forth. He plunged in the lead, breaking trail. The stranger was ahead, in trouble. It might already be too late to help. This much had the sign told him at the crest of the ridge.

For the tracks there had not been made by wolves, but by dogs. Only an experienced eye could have detected the difference. Only a more than ordinarily keen glance would have sought out and interpreted certain irregular lines on the snow paralleling that canine trail. The lines were made by a fragment of trailing harness; and that fact, to one who understood the way of dogs, told an ominous history.

No team of trailwise dogs, Mark knew, would desert their master in the wilds, provided that they acknowledged his mastery and had faith in him. If there was love in addition to faith, they would die, if need be, at his side.

But the stranger had purchased the dogs at Circle. They had known him but a matter of days. Not to be hidden from their canine intelligence was the fact that here was one of little experience, one not to be depended upon. In whatever crisis had overwhelmed him—and the pitfalls of the barrens were legion—they had waited a decent interval, then chewed themselves loose and departed. Heading toward Circle like homing pigeons, they had left the stranger's back trail, stumbled upon his, Mark's, camp, swung wide up the ridge, and so had galloped on into the night.

MARK found the stranger's trail almost immediately. Had he pushed on another two hundred yards before making camp, he would have found it the night before. With the going easier, his team increased their speed. He swung in at the rear, urging them to still greater effort.

He scanned each bend and hollow ahead, searched the ever-mounting terrain from each succeeding crest. Always the trail led on. An hour passed, and another. It was a dog-killing pace, but he held the team to it. He himself was winded and blowing when he surmounted a low divide that guarded a narrow, turbulent canyon, and so descended, abruptly, as upon a tragic stage.

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So lifelike was the stranger's pose, kneeling beside a heap of newly gathered wood, that had not Mark been forewarned, he would have supposed him to be in the act of lighting the fire. Almost, as he halted his dogs and strode forward, he expected to see the furred hood of the other's parka turn toward him, to hear his hail of welcome.

But the silence of the canyon, except for the chuckle of hidden water, was that of a tomb. The kneeling figure did not move. Mark knew, as he stood looking down at the other, that here was but the body of the man he sought. The stranger himself was far away.

Fragments of frayed harness were still attached to the sled, which stood on the bank, close at hand. Yonder was the hole in the ice where the chechahco had ventured forth to test its strength. No musher of experience would have needed to test such ice. Thinly cresting a deep, savage eddy, its treacherous quality was written on its face. But this youth—he appeared to be about Mark's own age—had been blind to the warning. Nor had he dreamed how swift and unerring must be his movements, at this temperature, should he chance to break through.

He had struggled, neck-deep, clinging to the jagged edge of the break. By superhuman effort, chilled to the very marrow and soul of him, he had dragged himself out. In frenzied haste, conscious of his dwindling forces, no doubt, he had gathered wood from an adjacent snow-covered windfall. A waterproof match safe was in his hand. His fumbling fingers had never opened it. Upon his rigid features was a rueful grin, like that of a courageous boy who laughs at his own misfortune, all unaware that he has approached and passed his final hazard.

"D-dog-gone!" Mark could almost hear him say, teeth chattering. "It sure is c-cold!"

Fumbling thus, he had been no longer cold. The barrens and life itself had become pleasantly remote. Grinning still, head bowed, he had fallen asleep.

CHAPTER IV.

THE M'COY STRIKE.

RETRACING his steps, Mark brought down his outfit to the flat. Since this was to be but a temporary camp, he did not unharness the dogs, nor feed them. Winded from their long run, they curled up in the snow, tongues lolling.

He built a roaring fire, using the wood the stranger had gathered. In the grip of the reaction from the hope that had sustained him since he had mushed forth from Circle, he moved methodically, in leisurely, apathetic fashion. The immediate need for haste was over. Pursuit, if any, lay far in the rear. Again, with the stranger's passing, he faced the winter and the barrens alone.

Adjacent to the flat, piercing the rampart to the west, was a narrow gorge whose depths were choked with the accumulated débris of frosty years. Protected from drifting snow by an overhanging ledge, Mark found a crevasse that angled down into eternal ice. Into this crevasse he lowered the stranger's body and shoveled loose snow upon it. He sluiced water over the snow, which formed swiftly into a sheath of ice. The whole comprised a tomb, protected from prowling animals of the wild, that would endure through the ages.

The outside pocket of the unfor-

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tunate one's parka had divulged a pipe, tobacco pouch, and similar unimportant belongings. There was also a bulky letter, well-thumbed. It was addressed to James H. Colby, in a small Oregon town. Mark had not delved deeper, for the stranger's clothing had congealed into a species of armor.

Except for the letter, which he had laid near the fire to thaw, he cached all the stranger's outfit, to the last item, at the base of the crumbled wall. The empty sled, thus revealed, was ancient and rickety. Some shrewd trader at Circle had palmed it off on the trusting chechahco. It had held up this far, but it was valueless now. Mark wrecked it with his ax, and used it as fuel to replenish the fire.

Only the letter was now left to mark the stranger's passing. Mark seated himself beside the fire, cross-legged, to read it. Not mere curiosity prompted the impulse. He himself could not personally report the tragedy to the authorities, according to the custom of the wilds. It was his intention to leave a notice at the cache.

But because travel along the trail to Broken Tent was slim indeed, it might be months, or even years, before the notice was read. The letter, meanwhile, might divulge some clew to the youth's family or relatives in the remote Outside.

Written in an ungainly scrawl, the immersion in the water had rendered it all but indecipherable. Yet he managed to make it out, word by word. Having read it, he sat for a long time considering its contents.

Under other circumstances, and had it fallen into other hands, certain information contained in the scrawled missive could have stirred up tremendous echoes along the Yukon. Short days before, he himself might have led the stampede to the upper Porcupine on the merest hint of the facts so bluntly stated herein. Now the knowledge left him cold and unmoved.

What was it to him, Mark Brent, if the greatest strike of a decade had been made on "the third fork of the creek below Broken Tent"? Gold was as useless to him now as it was to that other youth, kneeling forever at the bottom of the ice-walled crevasse. It was only as the news affected his own chances of survival that the discovery assumed importance.

Much of the bulky missive was devoted to explicit directions on how to arrive at Circle and depart without arousing suspicion; how to chart a course unerringly toward Broken Tent; practical advice for the trail, and the like. But by reading between the lines and bridging frequent gaps, Mark was able to reconstruct the complete picture.

The letter had been written by one "Ranger" McCoy, and sent down via Indian messenger the spring before to be mailed at Circle. McCoy had crossed over from the Mackenzie into the basin of the Porcupine, trapping and prospecting; and he had made a great strike. The clean-up had not been completed when the letter was written. The value of raw gold already stored in moose-hide sacks would run well into six figures. By the end of summer, when the huge pocket would have been worked out by the Indians he had impressed into service, a staggering total was in prospect. Would he, Jim Colby, the son of his former partner, come up to the Porcupine and help him transport this treasure to Circle?

The need for secrecy in this undertaking was plain. He, McCoy, had not yet recorded the claim; he

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would do so when he brought down the gold. He had no desire to precipitate a stampede before the pocket was worked out. It was not even known, as yet, that a white man was in the upper Porcupine. The value of the gold itself, in a region where laws were frail and unscrupulous characters were abroad, made caution vital. "Pete"—Mark gathered that this was McCoy's son—was of no force in an affair of this sort.

Pete was mentioned often in the missive. A weakling though the youth undoubtedly was, his hard-bitten father yet spoke of him with affectionate tolerance. He—McCoy—hoped that Pete and Jim would get along well together, as their fathers had before them in years long gone.

One other detail the letter revealed. McCoy and Jim Colby's father had parted more than thirty years before. They had kept in touch with each other by letter at yearly intervals, but their trails had never crossed again. The elder Colby, Jim's father, had died three years before. It was one of McCoy's greatest regrets that he had not seen his old friend again before he passed on. He was looking forward to meeting his ex-partner's son.

The rest of the letter was devoted to advice on the trail. Jim must start from Circle with the first snow. When he had achieved Broken Tent, he should camp for a day, to make sure that he was not being followed. When he was certain that no dog teams were behind him, he should proceed on down the creek that flowed north from the Divide. A day's journey down that watercourse, Pete, accompanied by Indian mushers, would meet the newcomer and escort him to the claim.

MORE than ever, as he pondered what he had read, stirring the coals, Mark felt sorry for the youth he had just buried in the chill crevasse. At second hand, through McCoy's letter, he had glimpsed much of his background, his hopes, his dreams. Obvious enough was the fact that McQuestion, for once, had been wrong. Jim Colby had not been a wanted man. Gold, and not flight from justice, had brought him two thousand miles northward from Oregon.

Often in yearning dreams, no doubt, Jim had seen himself striding on far trails, fading exultantly into trackless horizons. His pioneer blood, long since, must have thrilled to tales of the untamed wilderness. His father had tasted those fierce dangers and delights. He, too—so he must have sworn—would one day answer the ancient call.

With this letter the call had come. Blithely, with the carelessness of youth and inexperience, he had plunged into the heart of the most savage environment of a continent. He had laughed, no doubt, at the dangers lining the trail. He had rushed from Circle at a pace that experienced trail eaters might have envied. Then, within a day's run of Broken Tent, at the very threshold of adventures that are intertwined forever with raw gold, he had fallen.

And what of the weakling, Pete, waiting with his Indian mushers beyond the pass? And hard-bitten old Ranger McCoy, counting the days when his partner's son should arrive, to help him guard his treasure? Mark felt drawn to that indomitable old-timer. His personality—blunt, humorous, and kindly—had shone through the letter. His irregular scrawl had spoken plainer than words of joints stiffened through

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years of toil, or crippled with rheumatism. Yet, accompanied only by Pete and a few Indian packers, he had crossed from the Mackenzie. His lifelong search was over. He had made the big strike of prospectors' dreams. But his gold was still far from Circle.

As he pondered this phase of the situation—that had been disturbed so abruptly and finally by the passing of Jim Colby—Mark knew a yearning thought. It was born of his own loneliness, the bleak prospect awaiting him beyond Broken Tent. Instead of avoiding Pete and his Indians when he scaled the pass on the morrow, why not meet them boldly, tell what had occurred, and offer his assistance in transporting the gold to Circle? He need tell them nothing of his own past. He could not actually accompany the old-timer and his gold as far as Circle. But for a few days, or weeks, at least—as a stolen interval—the lonely camp fires that waited beyond would be postponed.

He smiled bitterly, shaking his head. It wasn't in the cards. The weakling, Pete, might accept such a casual offer of assistance from an utter stranger. Not hard-headed old Ranger McCoy. That experienced trail eater knew only too well the potentialities of the yellow metal in his possession. He must be satisfied beyond question of doubt as to who his trail mate was. His letter to Jim Colby had mentioned the unscrupulous characters abroad in the Yukon. He, Mark Brent, was at the head of the list; an outlaw even in a land that sheltered many wanted men.

The episode, then, was finished. So he decided, as he scraped the coals together and spread his hands to absorb the last warmth of the fire. The stranger was buried. He would post the notice on the cache, rouse up his dogs, and push on. When he had scaled the pass on the morrow and descended into the basin of the Porcupine, he would swing west of the creek where Pete waited. Ranger McCoy himself, growing anxious, would presently cross Broken Tent in search of Jim Colby. When he did so, the notice on the cache would tell the story.

The embers had become ashes at his feet. It was time to go. He drew forth a pencil from an inner pocket, and, using the envelope of the letter, wrote a brief account of the tragedy. He strode to the cache with it, placed it under a boulder, and erected a stick, blazed on either side, to attract attention.

This had taken him around the bend, away from his outfit. He returned, drawing on his mittens. Head bowed, he was about to order the dogs to their feet. The words of command froze on his lips.

The team was already standing at attention, their hackles erect, their triangular ears alert and quivering. The creak of sled runners, the padpadding of many running feet, was coming down the canyon. A dog team burst into view, and another, and a third. A man was running at the gee pole of each. The one in the lead, sighting Mark, flung up a hand in genial salute.

In a lightning chain of thought, Mark decided to stand his ground. It was too late now to think of flight. A glance assured him, moreover, that they were Indians. Their dogs were wolfish malemutes; their fur parkas bore the markings of the interior Ileuts. He stood beside the sled, within easy reach of his sheathed rifle projecting from the lashed tarpaulin, and waited.

To his utter amazement, when the one in the lead halted the wolfish

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dogs, just beyond fighting distance of his own team, and leaped forward to meet him, Mark saw that it was a woman. Her cheeks, framed in the furred hood of her parka, were flushed with excitement; her eyes danced. She stripped off her mittens as she advanced, and held out her hand.

"Hi, chechahco!" she greeted laughingly. "Bless us, what a fright you gave me! I've been camped on the other side of Broken Tent for two days, worried sick. But you're safe and sound, eh? How are you, Jim—Mr. Colby, I should say," she corrected herself. "Fit, what?"

He shook hands with her automatically, speechless. Within, he was dazed, his thought processes suspended. The impact of her greeting, and the implications behind it, registered but vaguely upon him. A white woman—a beautiful woman—on the upper Porcupine?

"But you're not a chechahco now." She drew on her mitten again and gestured toward the frozen creek bed. "I see you broke through and dried yourself out before you froze. Only an old-timer could have done that."

She placed her hands on her hips and surveyed him, her cheeks dimpling anew.

"Don't look at me like that!" she admonished. "Did we startle you, too? I'm Kathleen McCoy—Pete—of course. You're taller than I thought you'd be. And a great deal more solemn!"

CHAPTER V.

NEW TRAILS.

So swiftly had the situation overwhelmed him that Mark had had no time to do other than remain instinctively on guard, still-faced, as a skilled poker player. Belatedly now he grasped a staggering picture.

It seemed incredible enough, at first, that she should have thought he was Jim Colby, even at a distance. True, she had been expecting—hoping—to meet the unfortunate youth here. When she had first glimpsed him on the flat, she had seen, to her immense relief, that he was safe. The break in the ice had explained why he had been delayed. No other outfit could be on the Broken Tent trail at this season. He could be none other than the chechahco she had been sent forth to meet.

But even after meeting him face to face, no doubt or suspicion had clouded her friendly, welcoming gaze. She had called him Jim Colby. She had talked on—breathlessly, half-embarrassed, but wholly without fear or restraint—her preconceived notion firmly fixed. As he pondered this fact, Mark suddenly and for the first time realized a significant detail strongly hinted at in the letter in his pocket: this girl, Kathleen—Pete—McCoy, had never met Jim Colby! Old Ranger McCoy himself had never seen the son of his former partner!

It was on the tip of Mark's tongue to tell her what had happened, to explain the sequence of events that had led her so naturally to a false conclusion. A nameless impulse—a combination of impulses—halted the words.

Her overwhelming relief, so evident in voice and bearing, was greater than the facts seemed to warrant. Not only had she been worried on this account, her manner proclaimed; she, too, had been lonely and afraid. Now, having found him, she felt safe and secure. He shrank from crushing that implicit faith by announcing himself bluntly as a

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stranger. His every yearning urge, moreover, was to prolong these stolen moments a little longer.

He hesitated, therefore; and, hesitating, was lost. He knew that he must do something, say something, and quickly. He had spoken no word thus far. The stolid Indians stood in the background, their beady eyes searching him, his equipment, the sign about camp. The girl was studying him a little doubtfully.

"How's your father, Kathleen?" he asked.

The light and laughter drained from her eyes. As she looked at him steadily, he knew that he had blundered.

"Didn't you get my last letter?"

"The last letter I saw," he stated truthfully, "was the one in which your dad gave directions on how to get here." He drew it from his pocket and examined the first page. "It's dated May 10th."

"Then you must have left before the other arrived," said she. "I buried dad two months ago. He was only down a couple of days. Then he was gone."

"No!" he said, aghast. "How did it happen?"

She shook her head. "Just a sudden sickness. And a terrible fever. I think it was on account of the food. I'm sure it was. Of course he was old and wasn't nearly as strong as he thought he was. We've had plenty of meat, but our evaporated vegetables and fruit gave out long ago. Dad was afraid to send down for supplies. He said we'd have all our lives to eat hearty—after we got to Circle. You know how he was."

Other than biting her lip, she gave no evidence of emotion. After the manner of frontier women, she had accepted and absorbed the shock. But Mark knew how swift and demoralizing the blow must have been.

"And you've been all alone up there, ever since?"

"I had to wait for you," she said simply. "Dad made me promise. He was terribly worried about me when—when he knew he was through. He blamed himself for ever letting me come across from the Mackenzie with him. It was my fault, though. I insisted on coming." She fumbled in her parka and produced a folded paper. "He had a lucid moment, at the last. He wrote this and said to give it to you."

Mark read the single scrawled line. The reading of it irrevocably fixed the false role that chance had thrust upon him.

JIM: See her safely down to the river.
RANGER McCOY.

HE folded it slowly and replaced it in his parka. For the first time his set features relaxed in a smile. He placed his hand on her arm, making of it a courteous, reassuring and kindly gesture.

"I'll do it, Kathleen," said he. "I'll try to take your dad's place on the trail. I'll see you safely down to the river."

Her answering smile, somewhat tremulous, lighted up her face.

"It's more of a responsibility than you'd planned on," she said. "I don't need to tell you how lonely I've been, Jim. There are a few squaws in camp, of course. And these two Ileut boys are faithful and dependable as dogs. The rest of them frighten me, sort of. They've obeyed my orders since dad died, but they give me the impression that they're always on the verge of pulling out and leaving me in the lurch." Her wave of the hand thrust her late fears aside. "But we'll get along. There's two of us now."

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By nature, Mark saw, she was courageous, matter of fact, with more than a trace of the humor that must have been an outstanding characteristic of old Ranger McCoy. Again, her spirits returning, she was striving to forget a bleak chapter behind her.

The two stolid braves were talking among themselves, in sibilant gutturals. Jim Colby, the chechahco, would be presumed not to understand the Ileut dialect. Few white men, in fact, could follow it. But Mark, having spent two summers along the Nation and Big Black Rivers, understood the jargon perfectly.

A guarded glance at the girl's face indicated that she had not heard what had been said. Yet, he was sure, she must understand something of the language.

"What are your two bucks talking about?" he asked.

"They talked too fast," she confessed. "I wasn't paying much attention. I'll ask them. They've picked up a little English, of sorts. I'm trying to teach them more. George"—she spoke commandingly to the braves—"what you and Jake talk, eh?"

"We say—better go now," returned the stolid native. "Plenty dark, plenty quick. Make um camp at Ill-eé-taku—Broken Tent."

"Good," the girl agreed. "We go now. Swing um dogs, George."

The braves had said nothing of the sort. Their interchange had been far more significant.

"This is a strange camp," the one called George had said. "There have been other dogs here. This white man's face has seen many bad winters."

"Strange wood has been burned in the fire," the other had returned. "What did he bury in the canyon?"

Mark saw that he must allay these suspicions immediately. The faithful Indians would not hesitate to reveal to the girl what they had observed.

"Wait," said he to Kathleen. "Before we go. I was so flabbergasted when I saw you, and heard about your father's death, that I haven't had a chance to tell you. But it wasn't I who broke through the ice. When I came down into the canyon, I found a man here, frozen stiff. He hadn't been able to build a fire in time to save himself. His dogs had broken loose and gone away. Some unfortunate prospector, probably." He studied her narrowly. If she accepted the story at its face value, it was like rearing a marker over his own grave.

"Really?" she said. She looked about her, with an involuntary shiver. "Poor fellow!"

She was profoundly shocked, it was plain. Yet, beyond this entirely human impulse, it was equally plain that the facts had carried no deeper significance. She knew of her own experience how swiftly and without warning death could strike in the wilds.

"I didn't know what to do about it," Mark hurried on. "I buried him up yonder, in a crevasse. I cached his equipment around the corner, under the wall. I left a note, so if anybody ever came by, they'd know what happened."

He held his breath then. Suppose she wanted to look at the cache? What of the damning note, reposing under the uppermost boulder?

But his fears proved groundless.

"Poor fellow," she repeated. "You did well, Jim. It was all that you could do, under the circumstances. We'll report it when we get to Circle. Let's go."

"Hadn't you better tell your sav-

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ages?" he suggested. "It seemed to me they were looking around pretty hard."

"You're observing," she said. "But they're pretty curious, at that. George," she addressed that impassive brave, "white man die here, savvy? Boss Jim"—she indicated Mark—"he bury um. Over there. White man break through ice. Dogs all gone. Savvy?"

The pair eyed her without sign of comprehension. She repeated it, speaking slowly in the Ileut dialect. They nodded vigorously. For the moment, at least, Mark saw, the explanation had satisfied them.

"Mush, then," the girl commanded. "Swing um dogs, George."

COURTENAY

THEY camped that night in a sheltered cove below Broken Tent. The two Indians were not only No. 1 mushers on the trail; as camp tenders they were supreme. Mark would have helped in this necessary labor, but the girl decreed otherwise.

"Watch them," she commanded. "You haven't had much experience on the trail. You'll see how it's done."

Notwithstanding his very considerable experience on the trail, Mark was forced to concede that much could be learned by observing this highly efficient pair. They appeared to move slowly. They made no unnecessary motions. But in a matter of minutes, in the swiftly gathering darkness, a roaring fire was built, the dogs fed, a shelter had been erected for the girl at the base of the wall, and huge moose steaks from their own trail rations were sizzling in the pan.

They delved without ceremony into Mark's grub, having accepted him as a permanent member of the group. They sought out coffee, sugar, salt, evaporated potatoes, and fruit. The girl herself, using Mark's flour, mixed a batch of baking-powder flapjacks, while the stolid braves watched. Trained as they were in preparation and taste of the white man's strange and luxurious food, there were still a few rites to which they did not yet trust their hands.

"They're not sour dough," she apologized, as the braves poured the mixture avidly into smoking skillets, "but they'll sure taste good. We haven't had flour or coffee or fruit for weeks. I weakened, about three weeks ago, and sent two of the others down to Circle for supplies. They ought to be back by the time we reach the creek."

"You shouldn't have done that," Mark reproved. "They'll pay for it with dust?"

She nodded. "It was taking a chance, I know. But they're to be trusted. And I just couldn't hold out any longer. Lots of these interior Indians trade in gold. They don't dig it themselves, but they

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earn it packing, or get it in exchange for furs. It shouldn't cause any comment at the post."

Mark was on the verge of pointing out that the source of all gold in circulation along the Yukon was known to experienced eyes; that the appearance in trade of yellow metal differing in texture or other physical properties might easily arouse a suspicion of a new strike.

He checked the impulse just in time, as Jim Colby he was supposed to know nothing of these matters. In any event, the harm—if any—was already done.

He gained the esteem of the two natives by a simple gesture. When the prodigious and soul-satisfying meal was done, he discovered them squatting close at hand, eying his pipe with mute but eloquent intensity. He had much tobacco among his stores. He tossed a can to each. With grunts of satisfaction, they drew forth and loaded a brace of ancient and foul-smelling pipes.

A vast battle burst forth among the dogs. In the twinkling of an eye, one was down. Upon this one wolfish bodies formed a writhing, snarling mass. Mark snatched up a club and leaped into the fray.

With forceful skill, he struck and smote. The mass disintegrated, fell apart. Truculent battlers circled him sullenly, hackles erect. He bellowed upon them, menacing with his club. They gave ground, scattered. The fallen Husky slunk away to nurse its wounds. The brief flurry over, peace reigned anew.

MARK cast his bludgeon down and returned to the fire, breathing heavily. He was greeted by broad grins from the braves. The girl was smiling. Belatedly, Mark realized that he had again laid himself open to suspicion. His smoothing of troubled waters had not been the work of a chechahco, but of an expert.

Assuming his utter ignorance of what they were saying, the trio discussed the exploit brazenly in the Ileut dialect.

"He learned fast, this one," said George approvingly. "He does not fear dogs. Already they know his voice is the voice of a master. He will one day make a mighty hunter."

"His father was a wolf on the trail, so the old one said," agreed Jake. "This one is a wolf, also. He did not grow tired and fall back, though we came far to-day."

"In my dreams, since the old one, my father, died," said the girl, stirring the coals, "I have seen him come up the trail, to stand by my side, to help me. He is here now, and for me he will be like the shelter of a rock, in a storm."

The two Indians rolled up in the blankets presently, and were soon snoring. The wolf dogs ceased their restless circling in the darkness, snuffling for lost fragments of food. They curled up one by one at the edge of light, their plumed tails wrapped about their feet. Their snarling and snapping gradually dwindled, and the camp grew still in the night.

For a long time, Mark and the girl sat together beside the fire, talking in low tones. They piled on more fuel, so that sparks showered upward to the remoteness of the jeweled sky. It was turbulent country here, at the threshold of the pass. The mighty ramparts of the gorge were vague in the farther gloom. Beyond and higher still were icy peaks, from which the starlight glinted as from polished steel.

But the sheltered circle formed by the wall at their back, and the four loaded sleds, placed end to end, com-

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prised a sphere of radiance and warmth—physically and of the spirit—that was, for Mark, like a stolen glimpse of paradise.

He knew that he had no right within that circle. He was a masquerader, an outsider, one who did not belong. The very frankness and friendliness of the girl at his side, her every laughing glance that breathed of implicit faith, delight and trust in him—all this, he told himself, as they talked on lazily, stirring the coals, should be cutting him to the heart. By any ethical or moral law, by all standards of square dealing that he had thought to be an unyielding part of his own code, he should be cringing inwardly, unable to meet her gaze.

Instead, he knew with a species of dim and unbelieving awe, he was not only guilty and unashamed, but brazenly exultant. Times without number, in the solitude of the barrens, he had sat beside his lonely fire, dreaming of just such splendid moments as this. Countless lonely fires would beckon on in the future, when this golden interval was done. Why should he question the source of the treasures Fate had thrust into his hand?

Later, when the girl had retired to her shelter tent and he sat alone by the fire, he met and accepted a fuller measure of his responsibilities. The girl must be protected at all costs; her interests safeguarded; her trust justified. That much he owed to Jim Colby, to her and to his own square-dealing code of the past. He would see her safely to the river. At least, to within a safe day's run of Circle. Then, the purple passage over, he would tell her the truth, resume again the mask and rôle of Mark Brent, outcast and wanted murderer; and face once more into the wilds.

CHAPTER VI.

A CRISIS UNDREAMED.

As they scaled the frowning pass the following day, Mark saw how Broken Tent had eluded the early adventurers and explorers filtering across from the Mackenzie. The westward, or Yukon side was a maze of canyons and rugged gulches, born of warring forces when the world was young. From the eastward heights, overlooking the watershed of the Porcupine, the immediate foreground loomed as a similar unpromising terrain. Bleak ridges were upthrust like shoals emerging through a frozen, foam-crested sea. Beyond, as far as the eye could penetrate to the north and east, the great basin stretched, a vast and brooding desolation.

And yet, Mark knew, certain orms of rugged life persisted in those mighty, snow-clad wastes. Herds of caribou, some numbering into the thousands, drifted with the seasons through its hidden valleys. Wolf packs hung upon the flanks of these vast herds, bringing down the calves, the crippled and the aged. Myriad furred animals of the wild had already beaten countless trails along the banks of swamp and stream. And at intervals, when the all but unceasing winds of winter were momentarily at rest, the smoke of distant camp fires of the Ileuts and other interior tribes, rose up in frail pillars through the chill air.

To his surprise, the creek leading down beyond Broken Tent did not bear eastward, as he had resumed. Instead, it swung to the left. More and more to the north it turned, until they were paralleling the base of the barrier. This puzzled him, for they were also paralleling the course of the distant Porcupine, instead of forging toward it.

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It was after their first night camp beyond the pass, at a point where the creek turned at last to the east, the strategy of astute old Ranger McCoy became plain. Even if his letter to Jim Colby had fallen into other hands, the way to the great strike could not have been found without a guide. The Indians, leaving the creek at the bend, struck off boldly to the north.

For two days more they traveled. On the afternoon of the third day they came to a glacier-born stream that plunged down into a mighty gorge. Into the depths they descended and were speedily hemmed in by unscalable walls.

It was gloomy here, even when the sunlight glinted frostily on the heights. An eerie stillness was abroad in the vague semitwilight, for the whine of the wind was remote above them. The cold was deadly and penetrating, like that of a chill tomb. From beneath their feet came the sighing of hidden water.

Rounding a bend at dusk, they came suddenly upon a considerable camp and many fires burning. The canyon walls had widened here, then narrowed again, forming a huge pocket. A group of Indian tents, a half dozen or more, clustered at the lower end of the flat. Two cabins—low-roofed and sturdy—were built against the wall close at hand. In the doorway of the larger of these an Indian woman stood, peering toward them from beneath a shading hand. Upon the air was the welcoming clamor of many dogs.

"Home, James," said the girl over her shoulder. She spoke lightly, yet with a significant undercurrent of feeling. Here, in literal truth, had been her home for more than a year.

It was the great McCoy strike, destined to stir up major echoes along the Yukon—echoes that lived only until the engulfing thunders of the greatest of them all, the Klondike. Plain to the eye of experience was the fact that here was a major diggings. The contour of the heaped-up gravel along the bar, the long line of primitive sluice boxes—all snow-covered now—were evidence enough of months of toil. No such effort would have been expended unless the rewards were ample.

Analyzing the stream's probable northward course, Mark saw that it must be the one known on the Porcupine flats, below the ramparts, as the Little Muddy. It was an unpromising creek, at its confluence with the river, appearing to spring from dismal swamps and moss-covered muskegs below the barrier. This fact, which had turned back many prospectors in years gone by, was a further guarantee against surprise approach to the hidden and all but inaccessible pocket.

Also, Mark discovered, when he pieced together the geography of the region, they were much closer to the Yukon River than he had previously supposed. To achieve this point, by way of Broken Tent, he had described a wide arc, first swinging east, then north. Bonnet Plume could not be more than two days distant. From there, under favorable trail conditions, it was but three days to Circle.

AFTER feeding his dogs, Mark moved his equipment into the smaller cabin, built a roaring fire in the heater to drive the accumulated frost from the walls and spread his blankets on the bunk. This structure, it was plain, was the first that Ranger McCoy had built. Later, realizing the dimensions of his strike, he had prepared for a long

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sojourn by building more comfortable quarters.

The girl's voice came musically through the outer darkness presently, calling Mark to supper. He plunged across the intervening space, bareheaded, his face and hands exposed to the bite of the cold.

The large cabin, despite its uncouth exterior, was roomy and homelike. All about were evidences that Ranger McCoy had thoroughly understood the means of achieving a primitive luxury in the wilds. The log walls were thick and chinked with arctic moss. The huge stone fireplace, built against the living rock that comprised the rear wall, belched heat. Many skins carpeted the floor. The raw-hide-meshed chairs, the hand-hewn planking of the rough table, the equipment festooning the walls—all breathed of the skilled craftsmanship of the departed trail blazer.

The Indian woman, Minnie—Kathleen's cook, housekeeper and constant companion in camp—had already placed a huge and savory meal upon the table. She remained discreetly in the background, while the others ate.

Mark and Kathleen had become thoroughly acquainted on the trail. Inhibitions and restraints, long since, had fallen from both. Casting all thought of past and future aside, Mark had unconsciously reverted to the boyish, exuberant point of view that had been his before the searing brand of the North had been placed upon him. In frankness and sincerity, but with unaffected dignity and poise, she had met him halfway. It was as though they had known each other, had been old friends for a long time.

Yet this was different from all the friendly contacts that had gone before. The luxury of a table was between them. The stout walls shut out the world. A warm glow from the leaping flames enveloped them both, lighted up her firm, yet softly moulded features. As her gaze met his across their steaming cups—laughingly, half shyly—he knew that here was another scene and moment that would stay with him always.

When the vastly satisfying meal was done, they sat before the fireplace and discussed the future. It had been Ranger McCoy's plan, should any of the rich pay remain after winter set in, to continue to work the claim after Jim Colby arrived. It would be a tedious business to thaw and pan by hand, as would be necessary in the intense cold. Yet it would be worth while, so impregnated with raw metal was the gravel at bed rock. When the pay was worked out, they would descend with the gold to Circle.

But the girl had strongly hinted, on the trail, that she favored immediate departure. Only a fragment of the rich pay remained. Let the stampeders have it, she had asserted; let some one else thaw and pan the frozen muck. There might be rich ground above or below. What of it? She was anxious to quit the canyon that had claimed her nearest and last relative. She was yearning for the Outside.

Mark's selfish impulse, as they considered the future now, was to urge her to stay until all the dust was taken. Each day thus gained would postpone their parting. The hours, brief enough at best, were on the wing. But he knew that her own best interests decreed otherwise.

He agreed with her, therefore, puffing lazily on his pipe. They must start for Circle to-morrow. Each hour that their departure was postponed was fraught with danger. She was independently wealthy, ac-

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cording to Ranger's estimate; but until the claim was recorded, the gold was hers only in so far as they could defend her title to it.

"Ours," she corrected.

He looked at her, saying nothing. Under the intentness of his gaze, the glow on her cheeks seemed to deepen a little.

"Part of it belongs to you, of course," she said. "It's yours already. Dad always intended it that way."

"We'll discuss that later," said he, looking again at the wavering flames, "when we get down to Circle."

As at a sudden impulse, she arose and stood, poised. Minnie, the Indian woman, had long before retired to her den. In the stillness they could hear her heavy, animallike breathing beyond the door. To make doubly sure that she was not observed, the girl hung a heavy Hudson Bay blanket about the frame.

Then she crossed to the fireplace and laid her hand upon a pair of moose antlers that decorated its center. She took these down and laid them aside. The masonry thus revealed seemed solid as the wall itself. To Mark's astonishment, a thin slab of stone came outward under her manipulating fingers. Beyond was a cunningly designed recess some fourteen inches square. It was filled to the top with bulging moose-hide pokes, stacked together like so much cordwood.

Mark had never seen such pokes. They were huge. He counted them. There were eighteen in all.

"Great guns!" he whispered, grinning. "Don't tell me that's all gold!"

She nodded. "Five hundred ounces to the poke."

"Impossible!" He calculated rapidly. "Nine thousand ounces? You couldn't get so much dust into a hole that size."

"No?" She replaced the stone slab and the antlers, regarding him smilingly over her shoulder. "Just suppose, Mr. Chechahco, that you had a solid cube of gold, a foot square. How much would it weigh?"

"I've no idea," he confessed.

"Better than eleven hundred pounds. It's quite heavy, you know. There's seven hundred and fifty pounds here."

He whistled aloud. "I'm beginning to see why your father wanted help in getting it down to Circle. It's a freighting job. We'll have to split the load when we travel."

"Why not?" she agreed. "Half of it on your sled. Half on mine."

At that moment, from the direction of what they referred to as the "Indian village," came a vast commotion among the dogs. The crackling of whips resounded and guttural voices shouting commands. Mark's gaze shifted from the girl to the gun rack on the wall beyond her. He half rose from his chair.

But her quick, questioning frown had already smoothed away. She waved him back.

"I know," she said. "It's those packers I sent down to Circle. They've gotten here at last. It was foolish to send them, now that we've decided to leave right away. I could have waited a week or so more."

Footsteps approached, drew closer. There was a whispered conference at the threshold. A guarded knock resounded. At the girl's command, the door pushed in. The inseparable George and Jake appeared, followed by two others. They kicked the door shut and loomed in the flickering firelight, their faces impassive.

The last two were still garbed for the trail. Dog whips were in their hands. Their furs glittered and

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scintillated with snow, and their furred parkas, where their breath had played, were stiff with frost.

"What is it, George?" said the girl, with a meaning, half-amused glance at Mark. "Why you come, eh?"

MARK rose up and stood with his back to the fire, studying the stolid natives. A nameless instinct warned him that this was no casual moment as the girl supposed.

George did not trust himself to make the report in English. He spoke rapidly, in guttural Ileut.

"It is bad, little one," said he. "Runner-at-dawn and Little Elk"—he indicated the silent packers—"have seen much trouble on the trail. White men at Circle have questioned them about the gold. They answered nothing, but when they have left the river, the white men followed."

"Ah," said the girl, with a slight intake of breath. "They were followed. And what then?"

"To cover their tracks, and to lead the white men on a false trail, they went north, to the Big Black. They crossed the pass called Bonnet Plume, and so came to many well-traveled trails. You have told them, if they were followed, to cache the supplies and travel light. In the night they have done this, and so left the white men far behind."

"Good! They shall be well paid."

"I have still more to say," said the unemotional George. "It is very bad. Two days below, on the Little Muddy, they passed two hunters on the trail. One was a good Ileut, who is a blood brother. But the other was a renegade Stik, who is far from his own hunting trails. In the night, the good Ileut came alone to the camp of Runner-at-dawn and Little Elk, to warn them. The white man, when they have lost the trail, have offered much squareface as a reward to the Indian who will find it again. The Ileuts will not help in this, for we have spread the word. You are the daughter of the old one who was a friend of the tribe these many moons. But there are many renegade Stiks, whose own people have cast them out, and these are not to be trusted."

"It is bad," the girl agreed, her lips compressed. "I will tell Boss Jim, so that his counsel may help us."

Mark had already followed and analyzed the interchange. He listened in silence while the girl translated it, his thoughts ranging far afield.

"Dad was correct in playing safe," she concluded ruefully. "I shouldn't have taken a chance. Now what's to be done?"

"It's all right," he soothed. "No harm done yet. All that those stampeders have, thus far, is a strong suspicion that a strike's been made. They don't know where nor how big. First, they've got to find the canyon. After they find it, if they're on the level, they'll stake claims above and below and mush back to Circle to record it. If they're crooks, of course, it's something else again. Ask George how many white men trailed these packers."

"First, there was one," said George, in answer to the girl's question. "Then, three days out, there was two."

"The second one followed the first on suspicion," Mark said, when the girl had translated the reply. "There's liable to be a dozen or more before they find the canyon, if the rumor spreads at Circle. That's the way these stampedes go. That's what I've heard, at least," he cor-

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rected himself, remembering his rôle. "Best have them all pack to-night, eh, Kathleen? Ready for the trail at the first crack of dawn."

"Should we go by way of Bonnet Plume?"

He shook his head. "Broken Tent. It's safer."

"But it's three days longer," she pointed out. "Suppose they jump the claim and beat us back to Circle?"

"Let them jump it, if they think they can make it stick," said Mark. "What of it? The claim isn't the big jack pot in this game. It's the gold. Get the dust safely down to Circle and let them have the whole canyon."

"You're right," she agreed. "I'll tell them to get ready to-night."

"Wait." Mark scowled thoughtfully at the floor, pondering. "Do you trust these twins, George and Jake?"

"Absolutely. My father saved George's life, once. And he and Jake are what they call blood brothers."

"Good," said Mark. He knew what this meant among the Ileuts. "Tell George to pack light and bring his sled over here right away. Explain that we've got to pack to-night, too, but that you've got more than you can carry. He'll have to freight part of the load."

When these orders had been imparted and the four braves had shambled forth into the night, the girl turned to Mark questioningly.

"What part of my outfit must George carry?"

"Half the gold," said Mark. "It's too much for your team, plus trail equipment. Don't argue with me, lady." He spoke smilingly, and yet with the authority of the leadership that had now swung to him. "I've got to travel light. There may be scouting to do before we get to Circle."

Kathleen was satisfied by this logical explanation. Sobering, too, was the suggestion of nameless hazards that might line their westward trail.

But it was another eventuality—unsuspected by the girl—that caused Mark to avoid carrying a share of the gold. Already, in spirit, he was facing toward that moment when he must leave her and turn back. It might come suddenly, leaving no time to transfer the treasure. It might even be necessary to forsake her ranks without her knowledge.

Whatever developed, he must be prepared—once her safety was assured—to fade from the picture as abruptly as he entered into it.

THE blackness of the canyon was yielding slowly to the gray of dawn when they finished breakfast. The sleds were loaded and waiting, the dogs in harness. During the previous hour, a commotion at the Indian village had told of breaking camp. The distant tents were down. Furred figures crouched beside a wavering fire. Many teams and sleds bulked in the farther gloom, ready for the trail.

Mark had emerged from the girl's cabin and was on the point of crossing to his own when George and Jake approached, trailing the latter's team. Sensing something uneasy in the bearing of the two natives, Mark waited until they pulled up. Kathleen came forth, already garbed for the trail.

"Little one," said the impassive George, facing her, "we are very much ashamed. We two shall be faithful to the end. But the others have already forgotten how the old one, your father, was a friend to them during those many moons.

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They have forgotten how he cared for them in their sickness, and taught them much wisdom of the trail. They have talked among themselves in the night. This morning they held a council and said: 'We have labored long, and we have been paid. We owe nothing, and nothing is owing to us. It is finished. The white man has come. Let him guard his woman and his gold. We return now to the winter camp of the tribe.' "

"That is bad," said the girl. She did not translate, for Mark's benefit, what had been said. "Do not be ashamed, my friends. You two have kept your promise. It is true that the others have been paid." She studied the distant Indian camp, frowning in thought. "If I talk to them, and offer them more, will they go with us as far as Broken Tent?"

"As to that," returned the native, "I cannot say. They do not want more gold. They have said: 'A little gold is good. It can be traded for fine blankets, for white man's food, for shells and traps. Also, on occasion, for squareface. But much gold means much trouble. We have seen it. It is the white man's folly.' "

"True," Kathleen agreed. "All true. But much that is good for others can also be bought with much gold. Look, George. I am leaving things of value behind me, because I must travel light. There are many furs and traps and cunning tools that the old one, my father, can no longer use. To your people, they are worth more than gold. If I say to them: 'It is all yours, to divide among you' —will they trail with us then?"

"I cannot say," repeated George.

The girl drew on her mittens with a gesture of determination. To Mark she said, with an appearance of carelessness that did not hide her worry:

"There seems to be a little disagreement down yonder. I'll see if I can straighten it out."

"Mutiny?"

She nodded. "Maybe a little lecture will bring them back into line."

"Don't waste too much eloquence on 'em," Mark advised. "If they feel that way about it, they wouldn't be much force in a pinch, anyway. We'll get along."

In the small cabin, all but denuded of equipment now, he exchanged his camp moccasins for the high-laced pacs of the trail. As he wriggled into his parka, a new uproar broke forth in the distance. Deeming this to be caused by the arrival of the girl among the native teams, he continued his leisurely preparations for departure.

He kicked the hearth of the heater shut and drew on his furred mittens. He was adjusting the draw strings of these, his eye on his rifle in the corner, when George's voice came from the threshold, guarded but apprehensive:

"Boss Jim! You come—quick!"

Mark tore the mitten from his right hand and snatched up his rifle. He stepped out into the chill dawn and cast a lightning glance about him.

"White man come," said George, pointing. "Many dogs. Many bad Indians."

The girl was returning across the flat. A bulky figure, white with the snow of the trail, strode beside her. There was weariness in this one's bearing; there was also a species of arrogant triumph. His confident step was almost a swagger.

A cold other than that abroad in the canyon seemed to descend upon Mark as the pair grew closer. Many times, since he had fled to the wilds, he had tried to visualize the type of "jack pot" that would occur when

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his past, finally, should overtake him. This was a crisis undreamed.

"Jim—Mr. Colby," said Kathleen, pale but composed. "This gentleman has just arrived, with a partner and a considerable number of packers. To look over prospects here, he says. His name is Trask."

CHAPTER VII.

RAW GOLD.

THE two men stood, eye to eye, their rifles held in the crook of their arms. Mentally, Mark steeled himself against the first ruinous words that Trask should utter. Because the girl's attention was fixed upon Mark, she did not see the disbelief, amazement, and finally the guarded triumph successively revealed in the big man's bulging eyes. When, the silence becoming prolonged, she glanced from one to the other, the faces of both were inscrutable.

"Colby, eh?" said Trask. "Well, well!"

"You've met before?" said the girl.

Each remained silent, awaiting the other's cue.

"Your face seems familiar, Trask," said Mark, at length. "I wonder if I didn't see you around Circle City, while I was waiting for snow?"

Trask pondered this lead, studying Mark's face. His bearded features split in a slow grin as comprehension came.

"Sure," said he. "That's it. I've got you placed now. You're that chechahco who bought him an outfit and grub and told it around that he was heading up river. Instead of that, it was this hole in the wall you were heading for, eh?" His roving glance took in the gravel bar, the diggings, the cabin, and the girl. "Looks good, Colby. Darn good. How did you happen to stumble onto a layout like this?"

"I was about to ask you the same

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question," returned Mark. "What made you suspect there was a strike here?"

"Cinch," said the big man. "It's a habit of mine to be Johnny-on-the-spot when things begin to break. There was a killing at Birch Creek, you savvy. A bunch of us fetched in the body to Circle. While I was carousing around, I see a couple of Ileut packers buying supplies. When McQuestion weighed out their dust, I got a good look at it. It's the pure quill. It isn't from Birch Creek, nor Forty Mile nor the Stewart. Where then? It must have come from the Porcupine. So I follow these packers out."

"And trailed them right into the canyon?"

Trask shook his head, scowling. "They were cagy as wolves, blast 'em. They gave us the slip down below. Cached their stuff and made a run for it. We lost 'em in a hurry. But we came across a band of renegades who were traveling light. Stiks. Minooks. A smattering of lower river Indians—all of 'em branded with the mark of Cain. A sweet-scented layout. For my purposes"—he eyed Mark meaningly—"they were made to order. They'd cut their own grandmother's throat for a gallon of squareface. So we found the trail in a hurry. And here we are."

"We?"

"Another up-an'-coming lad followed me out from Circle," Trask explained. "We're in cahoots now. We didn't know what we'd find here in the canyon, so we decided to play safe. We split our army down below. Half our cutthroats came upstream with me. My pardner, with the rest of our li'le playmates, went on ahead and dropped down from above." He pointed, with his free hand. "You can see 'em up yonder."

Mark and Kathleen turned to look. The latter's sharp intake of breath was plainly audible. Furred figures bulked at the upper bend, waiting. Dog teams were grouped in the shadow. In advance of the others, a white man stood motionless, leaning on his rifle.

THE reason for Trask's brazen assurance, his confidence, was now plain. With his renegades on guard above and below, retreat was cut off. The canyon was bottled up.

"But I don't understand, Mr. Trask," said the girl. "Just what did you expect to find here?"

"Indians," said the big man easily. "Scratching around, maybe, picking up surface gold. They wouldn't know what they had, how big it was. But if we startled 'em, they would be liable to take what dust they'd found and make a run for it. We never dreamt there was a white woman here. Nor a white man—named Colby." He studied Mark, plucking thoughtfully at his beard. "There's several jokers wild in the deck."

That Kathleen suspected much, but was courageously determined to bring all hidden motives into the open, was obvious to Mark. She looked the big man full in the face. Like a bold strategist, she made no attempt at concealment.

"As a mater of fact," said she, "there's nothing unusual in the situation. My father staked this claim. He died this fall, after working it all summer. He had already sent for Mr. Colby, to help him clean up. Mr. Colby arrived last night. We decided to leave this morning and go down to Circle to record the claim. That's a normal procedure, is it not?"

"Might be."

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"Are you suggesting," said the girl, "that you would have any objection to that procedure?"

"Might," said the big man. "I'm still figuring. You see, lady, there's not supposed to be any white men—or women—on the Porcupine. There's not supposed to be any gold—least of all on the Little Muddy. So what the world don't know, won't rouse up any ripples. Meanwhile, here's a big strike. Don't try to fool me, lady—it's big. A blind man could see it, just to look at the diggings. Maybe there's rich ground above and below. Maybe there ain't. Maybe it was just one big pocket. Point is, you've cleaned it out. You've got the dust. You're taking it with you when you mush down to Circle. On those sleds there, eh?"

"Why not?" the girl countered. "If you'll examine the monuments, you'll find that the claim is properly staked. Ground has been worked only within the limits of the claim. In other words, it's our gold.

"True," agreed Trask. He looked at Mark, the tolerant twinkle fading from his eyes. "All true. And still we've got to do a little figuring."

"Kathleen," said Mark. "I'd like to talk to Mr. Trask alone for a moment, if you don't mind. Over here." He gestured toward his cabin. "It shouldn't take long. Something tells me we can get together."

"Certainly," said the girl. The look she gave him shook him to the depths. It was appealing, reassuring, eloquent with implicit faith. "I'm sure Mr. Trask is entertaining ambitious ideas. A reasonable discussion would probably clear it up."

"Not a doubt of it," agreed Trask, "not a doubt in the world." His hearty manner was more menacing than spoken threat. "Just a second—er—Colby. Here comes my partner. He's got to sit in on this."

The distant watcher had taken up his rifle and was striding toward them. He was too far away to recognize, even in the strengthening light. His face was a mere white blur in the hood of his parka. Yet his manner of walking was familiar. He, too, was one of those from Birch Creek. But which one?

MARK hurried Trask toward the small cabin. He feared a second meeting with an old acquaintance in the girl's presence. This newcomer, lacking Trask's iron self-control, might blurt forth the truth. Strangely, it was Kathleen's disillusionment, rather than the as yet unnamed dangers hemming them in, that loomed as the immediate show-down.

But he had not yet suspected how furiously and far, and along what trails, Trask's nimble mind had ranged. He gained a hint of it the moment they had entered the cabin.

Trask kicked the door shut. His affable manner dropped from him like a cloak.

"Talk fast, Mark," said he. "How big's the pot?"

"The dust?"

"The dust." The other's eyes glowed beneath savagely knitted brows. "Quick! How much?"

Mark was suddenly cold and poised. In a flash of understanding he saw Trask's twisted point of view. Inflamed by the mere presence of raw gold, the big man's predatory thoughts had leaped far ahead. Assuming their interests to be mutual—that Mark was interested solely in the gold and the means to gain possession of it—he was hurrying to impart some information before his partner should arrive.

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No useful purpose, Mark knew, could be served by minimizing the dimensions of the treasure. On the contrary, the flames should be fed.

"It's fat, Trask. About nine thousand ounces, I should say."

"Nine thousand ounces!" The other's teeth bared slowly. "Nine thou—— Listen!" He grasped Mark's arm and thrust his face close. "You and I can work together on this. We talk the same language. Remember that when Courtenay gets here. Who dealt him a hand? He trailed me and horned into the play. We'll figure him out—cold."

"Courtenay?" repeated Mark. "Is *Court* your partner?"

"Bah!" said Trask with contempt. "You used to think he was a friend of yours, eh? Get wise, boy. There's no such thing in this man's country. Among lads of our stripe. Courtenay doesn't give a hoot about you, nor me, nor the whole blasted world. Don't I know the still-faced snake! When a man like him goes bad, he is *bad*. Point is, here's a pot to be split. It's big. It's fat. We splitting it two ways or three? I say two. Am I right?"

Mark eyed him fixedly, saying nothing. Footsteps had drawn closer to the threshold. There was no further time for parley.

"I'd better be right," said Trask. "Look to your hole card, Brent. I can figure either of you in. I'm choosing you. The lad I figure out is—out."

Mark took up some fuel and bent over the heater as the door pushed in. He did not look up after the other entered, but continued at his task in leisurely fashion.

"Courtenay," said Trask, "this is Colby, that chechahco who bought dogs and grub at Circle. He's stumbled onto a big strike here, just as we suspected. Something tells me we're all going to be friends."

"For business purposes," added Mark. He straightened up suddenly, looking the other full in the face. "How are you, Court?"

His attempt to take the other by surprise failed utterly. Astounded though he was, the Englishman had schooled himself too long in concealing his emotions. He looked hard and piercingly at Mark, then glanced at Trask. When the hood of his parka turned back slowly, his pale, thin-lipped features expressed only a species of aloof and amused contempt.

"Brent, eh?" said he.

A week before—or was it years? —Courtenay had said in his, Mark's, cabin: "I speak as a friend." Mark would have sworn then that the words had come direct from his all but inaccessible heart. There was no remote gleam of sympathy or understanding now in his hard, fishlike stare.

"Brent," he repeated. "Out of the whole bally North he pops up here. But why, old man?"

"Why?" Trask grunted. "I'll tell you why. On those two sleds pulled up in front of the other shack there's better than nine thousand ounces in dust. Get that, Court. Over a hundred and fifty thousand berries. Simoleons. Coin of the realm. It's a jack pot in any man's language."

"I see," said Courtenay. "Nine thousand ounces. And you're numbered among the vultures, eh, Brent? Except that you got here first." He nodded slowly, his eyes on Mark's face. "But why the new name—Colby, is it? And who is the charming lady I passed just now?"

"That's what I crave to know, too," Trask growled. "Before we start talking turkey, let's get the whole picture."

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MARK studied them both before replying, his thoughts ranging forth like wolves that were seeking a scent. Because his old feeling of spiritual kinship with Courtenay died hard, he looked intently at the Englishman, seeking the slightest sign, the quiver of an eyelash, affirming that the man who had once helped him past another grim crossroads of life would stand by him in the forthcoming crisis.

Courtenay vouchsafed no such sign. He merely waited impassively; and it came to Mark, as he appraised the dilemma that had arisen so swiftly about Kathleen and himself, that he could take no chances in any event. The stakes were too great. He had sworn to see the girl safely to the river. It was too late now to accomplish this by force. Even if Courtenay were with him, they would be but two against Trask and his renegades. Because the hidden canyon was remote, and whatever transpired here might remain hidden for months—perhaps forever—Trask would stop at nothing.

The first and vital move was to get the girl out of the canyon. Once in the open country, on the trail, some situation might develop that could be used to advantage. To gain even that slight advantage, he must impress this pair with the belief that his interest and theirs were one, that he was, and had been from the first, interested solely in the gold.

It came hard, on Courtenay's account. It was hard to destroy whatever faith the Englishman might hold in him. Yet he had no choice. The safety of the girl was the task at hand. Compared to that, and after that, nothing mattered.

Having thus decided his strategy, he plunged boldly to the attack. In brief words he recounted his experiences since leaving Circle City. He did not distort the facts, but by suggestion clothed them with the complacence of a gambler to whom life, unexpectedly, has dealt a royal flush. He explained how the girl had accepted him as Colby, and how he had allowed that impersonation to stand. Throughout, he made it appear that he had asked no questions of smiling gods, but had played his cards to the limit, as a good gambler should.

Trask guffawed aloud when the recital was done, nodding his approval. There was no gleam of humor in Courtenay's inscrutable eyes. With an inner and bitter twinge, Mark saw that Trask had been right, after all, in his appraisal of the Englishman's ruthless caliber. The latter's first question indicated that a language had been spoken here that he thoroughly understood.

"A singular narrative," said he thoughtfully, stroking his lean jaw. "Most unusual. But don't spoof us, Mark, old man, on one particular. Are you sure this chap Colby was dead *before* you found him?"

"What do you mean?" Mark countered.

But the implication back of the words was plain. It was a phase of the situation, with respect to the passing of Colby, that had never before occurred to him. From his own account of it, he saw now, he could have murdered Colby for the specific purpose of stepping into his shoes.

His first instinctive reaction was to recoil from the thought, to deny it vigorously. He restrained himself just in time. After all, what of it? At this stage of the game, another killing more or less charged to him made no difference. A condemned man died but once.

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"It's of no importance," said Courtenay with a thin smile. "Let it pass. Strange that I should ever have thought you soft inside! Back yonder at Birch Creek——" He shrugged his shoulders. "The point is, Mark, old man, don't be reticent with us. You're not talking to strangers. As for myself, I never boast. But Trask here has blazed his own trails. Up on the Stewart. And over on the Mackenzie." He beamed coldly upon the big man. "Eh, Trask?"

"Plenty," Trask growled. His sullen, smoldering gaze was fixed upon Mark. "But never mind that. The committee being assembled according to Hoyle, is there any objection to proceeding forthwith to the business before the house. The chair hears none."

"We have weighty matters before us, to be sure," agreed Courtenay. "Nine thousand ounces, I think you said. And the question is——"

"How and when we split it."

"And where," Courtenay added. "Yes, let us proceed, by all means."

CHAPTER VIII.

A DARING PLAY.

IF Mark had had any remotest notion that shreds of moral stamina still remained in the pair before him, he was speedily disabused. The very bluntness with which they swung into the discussion, disdaining all pretense, left no room for doubt. Often before, in the presence of raw gold, he had seen the souls of men peer forth as through a mask. It had not been good to look upon, this revelation of how thin was the veneer of centuries. The thing he glimpsed now in Trask's eyes was not good to see.

The big man, as usual, assumed the lead.

"Here's my idea, gents. It's subject to debate. It'll give us something to sink our teeth into. We stake the claim above and below. That makes three, with discovery. We cut cards for discovery. Maybe there's dust left in it. Maybe there ain't. It's a good gamble. The main reason for staking the claims is to cover our tracks. The dust already out of the ground is the pot we're interested in. To blazes with the claims.

"We take the said dust and mush down to Circle. We record three claims. Not on the Little Muddy. On some other creek. Maybe along the Big Black. Why? So the rest of the popeyed lads at Circle won't find this canyon. They'll look all winter, all summer. They never would find it, unless they picked up some talk among the Indians. Meanwhile, we're on our way Outside. With the pot." He spread his hands, grinning from one to the other. "Listens good?"

Courtenay stroked his lean jaw, his narrowed glance resting with apparent casualness on Mark.

"Hm-m-m," said he. "And what split do we make?"

"Three ways," said Trask. His gaze likewise fixed upon Mark.

"And the girl?" questioned the Englishman softly.

"The girl will be out of the picture," said Trask. "Nobody knows she's here except the three of us. Nobody ever needs to know. My Minooks are heading for the interior. They'll take her with them. They can trade her off to one of the interior tribes that range farther east."

"Not so good," Courtenay objected. "Too dangerous. Your Minooks can be trusted, of course, to keep her safely hidden. But rumors are certain to drift back sooner

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or later. These Ileuts, for instance. They know she's here."

"I can fix it with the Ileuts," said Trask. "They know what it means when gold is found on a creek. It ruins the trapping forever. The Little Muddy's one of their best streams, farther down. Sell 'em on the theory that the only way to keep the wild-eyed prospectors off the Little Muddy is to forget all they've seen, and you couldn't pry information out of them with a crowbar. Well?" he demanded as Courtenay still shook his head, eying Mark. "Well, what's your idea?"

"My idea," said the Englishman, as calmly as he might have spoken of the weather, or the probable date of the spring break-up, "would preclude any risk whatsoever. As long as the girl's alive, even in the interior, she'll be a constant menace. With stakes of this magnitude, why take a chance?" He extended a slender hand, thumb downward. "Bury her here."

There was a momentary silence in the cabin. Then Trask's chuckle rumbled in his throat.

"What did I tell you, Mark?" he demanded with a wolfish grin. "Didn't I say he was a still-faced snake? You're probably right at that, Court. We can't be squeamish at this stage of the game. Best make the chapter final. We'll draw straws. No, we won't have to. Whoever draws discovery——"

"Wait," said Mark. His face, he knew, was glistening. Despite his iron self-control, his voice was harsh. "That's out. I've got a better program."

"Ah!" said Courtenay, drawing forth his cigarette case. "Have we gotten a rise out of him at last? Struck pretty close to home that time, eh, Mark, old boy?"

MARK knew then that he underestimated the caliber of this inscrutable cutthroat. It was easy to persuade Trask that their interests were one. The big man, in fact, had assumed as much from the first. But Courtenay's mental processes were of a different order.

"You know, Mark," said the Englishman, blowing a cloud of smoke upward, "there's been unusual aspects to this situation from the first, as far as you're concerned. Your reactions haven't rung true. Trask and I understand each other thoroughly. But to me, at least, you've represented an unknown equation thus far. In a deal like this, each of us must know where the other stands. Without—er—the shadow of a doubt."

"Call a spade a spade," said Mark. "What are you driving at?"

"For example," said the other, "the gold—this magnificent jack pot—was all yours before we appeared on the scene. In the hollow of your hand. You had, according to your own story, worked long and cunningly toward that end. Yet, without objection, you contemplated parting with two thirds of it. Does a wolf of your resources give up his kill so readily?"

"Go on," said Mark between his teeth. "What else?"

"You have disclaimed any interest in the girl," continued Courtenay. "She was, according to your own story, merely a means to an end. Yet the moment we touch upon her welfare in this discussion you burst forth in a nervous rash. Your hackles, in a manner of speaking, are immediately erect. Is it possible, Mark, old boy, that you have acquired a personal interest in the lady? If so, doesn't that immediately suggest that you wouldn't

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hesitate to set her interests above ours? Or—since you are young and romantically inclined—even above your own? You are a skilled gambler, Brent." He shook his head, his careless tones hardening a little. "But your technique is—ah—crude. Put your cards on the table, if you please."

"He's right," growled Trask, instantly aroused and belligerent. "Right as whistling. I'd never thought of it that way. It takes a snake to watch a snake. Spread your hand, Mark."

Mark had already reached this decision. His sole resource was to appear to come out in the open. His motives must stand the acid test of Courtenay's calculating logic. It must also satisfy Trask's more primitive but equally dangerous cunning.

He therefore chose his words with care. One slip at this juncture, he knew, would be fatal.

"I'll do it," said he. "Listen close. First, I didn't kill Colby, as you suggested, Court. He passed out just as I said he did. Broke through the ice and froze. I didn't step into his shoes on account of the gold. To be frank, there wasn't much chance that I could ever use it. I'm a wanted man. I've got to stay in hiding. But I was lonely, Court. You know how it goes. When the girl assumed so instantly that I was Colby, I let it ride. For a few days—a few weeks, if I was lucky——"

"Precisely," Courtenay agreed. "Now you're talking more in character, Mark, old boy. Just as I suspected. You're soft, after all. Inside. Eh?"

"Then you lobos came," Mark continued. "Sure I agreed to splitting the pot. Why not? We hadn't gotten down to trading talk yet. We're in the thick of it now. There's something else I want, besides my share of the dust. It's the girl. You've named it, Court. You're right about my interest in her. She's a bigger strike for me than all the gold in the Yukon."

"Hm-m-m," said Courtenay with a thin smile. "That statement, at least, has the ring of sincerity. I'm beginning to see a gleam through the mist, Mark, old cabbage. Instead of turning her over to Trask's renegades, or otherwise—er—disposing of her, we give her to you. In return, you guarantee that her lips are sealed."

"As surely," Mark said, "as though the earth had swallowed her up. Why? Because she trails with me."

"Ah!" said Courtenay, and the incomprehensible nature of the man clothed the words with real feeling. "Why not, to be sure? With her you could face the barrens, scale mountains, laugh in the teeth of winter storms. 'Wheresoever she was,' he quoted softly, '*there* was Eden'—and all that sort of thing, what? But go on, Mark. What was the immediate program you had in mind?"

"Wait," cut in Trask. "I'm beginning to see daylight in the swamps, also. It's us that's making the trading talk, not Brent."

His growling voice was a discordant and ominous note. It was not in the nature of the man to leave the decision of events to others. His predatory instincts, moreover, Mark saw, had caused him to see new possibilities of gain in the situation.

"As a matter of fact, Court," said he, "why figure Mark in at all? He wants the girl. We want the dust. What could be sweeter? We make the split now and travel. He's got nothing to trade. What we say goes."

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THIS was the precise angle that Mark had hoped fervently to avoid. He spoke swiftly, pinning his hopes to the chance that Courtenay's cold and calculating logic would see eye to eye with him.

"You're wrong, Trask. I've got something to trade. You forget that the girl has confidence only in me. I've got to maintain that confidence, or we're sunk. Bury us both here and you're sunk. There's too many Indians in the canyon. It's bound to leak out. But guarantee me the girl, give us a third of the dust so we'll have a stake after we cross the Mackenzie, and I'll show you a program that will put you both in the clear. With no back trail to cover."

"Let's hear it," said Trask. "We'll pass on it."

"First," said Mark, "I'll have the girl dismiss her Ileuts. All but two, I mean. There's a couple who'll be useful as camp tenders and drivers on the way down. She doesn't need an escort with the dust, I'll explain to her. You two are on the level, and you'll see us down to the river. The Ileuts aren't of any force in a pinch, anyway, and Trask's savages are to be trusted. Then we'll start out, either by way of Bonnet Plume or Broken Tent."

"Broken Tent," Courtenay voted.

"Why?" demanded Trask. "Bonnet Plume's closer. Why swing so far south?"

"It's safer," Courtenay spoke with finality. "You forget, Trask, that you're not the only one who saw the gold from the Little Muddy. McQuestion saw it. A new strike would make more business at the post. Stampeders are probably coming through Bonnet Plume now."

Mark was inwardly elated on two counts. First, because the campaign he had secretly mapped out for himself and the girl required that they go by way of Broken Tent; and second, because it was obvious that Courtenay was disposed to agree to the program thus far.

"Below Broken Tent," Mark continued, "within a day's run of the river, I tell the girl what's what. There's just the three of us left, you understand. She's dismissed her two Ileut camp tenders. No witnesses——"

"Wait a second," cut in Trask suspiciously. "I keep my renegades. All the way. Just to copper all bets."

"Sure," said Mark. "But they're trailing behind. They don't know what it's all about when the showdown comes. All they know is that when the party moves on, the girl and I turn back."

"But will she agree to all this?" questioned Courtenay.

"She'll have no choice." Mark forced a grim smile. "She'll agree to it before we start back. This is brass tacks. After all, even though I couldn't protect her gold, I'll have saved her life."

Courtenay and Trask eyed each other for a space, considering. The big man plucked doubtfully at his beard. The Englishman blew a cloud of smoke upward and examined it thoughtfully.

"No witnesses, as Mark has pointed out," he mused. "No clews here in the canyon that anything is amiss. No crimes of violence to haunt our consciences, such as they are. I'm for it," he announced with decision. "And you, Trask?"

"Let's go," growled Trask.

Mark stooped over the heater, ostensibly to close the hearth against their departure. In reality, it was to hide the shaking of his hands. He had not realized, until that instant, how furious had been his con-

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centration, his marshaling of resources, in the moments just past.

When he straightened up, his face was a mask. Inwardly, exultance roared through his veins like fire. As to what awaited beyond Broken Tent, he neither knew nor cared. It was written in the cards. Meanwhile, he had gained his first objective. Momentarily, at least, they were free.

CHAPTER IX.

CROSS CURRENTS.

WITH Mark in the lead, the trio emerged from the cabin into the full light of dawn. Kathleen was waiting beside her sled, with her two impassive braves near by. Trask's renegades milled restlessly among their dogs at each end of the canyon. The Ileuts, closely grouped at the western extremity, were packed and ready for the trail.

The girl studied Mark's face with almost pathetic intentness as they drew near. She held her head erect, her cheeks pale. What torturing doubts and apprehensions had assailed her during the long conference, Mark could well imagine.

He smiled upon her reassuringly, his manner confident.

"It's all right, Kathleen. Sorry to have taken so long, but we were discussing the best way to go down to the river, trail conditions and the like. Excuse me"—he laid a hand on the Englishman's arm—"I'd forgotten that you two hadn't met. Mr. Courtenay—Miss McCoy."

The Englishman bowed from the hips. The girl vouchsafed him the merest glance, with a murmured acknowledgment.

"We're ready to go, then?" she said to Mark.

"Immediately. As soon as they've staked claims above and below your discovery, that is. You can dismiss your Ileuts now, Kathleen. Except George and Jake, of course. These gentlemen are going to accompany us to Circle."

"If you'll permit us," put in Courtenay suavely. "Mr.—er—Colby has told us the amount of gold you are taking with you. Since we must hurry down to Circle to record our claims, I fancy it would be best to travel together."

"By way of Brcken Tent," added Trask, thus affirming all that had been said. "No use meeting up with any wild-eyed stampeders. But you don't need to worry, lady. I've got some savages with me that I can trust."

Other than the slow return of blood to her cheeks, the girl gave no evidence of overwhelming relief. She smiled upon them all, and looked again at Mark. Momentarily in her eyes was a species of awe, a broadening respect, as though he had grown in stature before her.

"We'll be happy to have them with us, of course," she said. "I really owe an apology to Mr. Trask. I must confess, when he first came into the canyon——"

" 'Sall right, lady." The big man guffawed hoarsely. "I don't blame you any. I'm just a rough customer, struggling along. But my heart's in the right place."

"My Ileuts are anxious to go," Kathleen told Mark. "Up to the Porcupine, I mean. They would have been gone already, except that they're a little dubious of those other Indians below. They think they're held prisoners here, or something of the sort."

"Let 'em go," said Mark carelessly. "We don't need them now. Eh, Trask?"

"I'll tell 'em," said the big man.

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"I'll also fetch up my savages. Then we'll be ready to hit the trail, as soon as we stake the claims."

He strode away. Courtenay glanced from Mark to the girl.

"I'll follow along," said he. He gestured toward the diggings. "You'll join us there?"

Mark nodded, and a moment later he and the girl were alone.

He looked down at her smilingly. She moved a little closer, and placed a hand on his arm.

"It was wonderful, Jim. Making friends of them, I mean. I didn't think it possible. But are you *sure* they're to be trusted?"

Mark had already decided that he would give her no hint of the true situation until the final showdown was at hand. He knew his own caliber as a poker player. He was not so sure of hers.

"Sure," said he. "They're to be trusted. They've lived a long time in the North."

"I think Mr. Courtenay is all right," she said. "But I can't get over how that big man looked when he first saw the diggings yonder. Like a hungry grizzly, sort of. Or a wolf." She shivered a little. "While you were in the cabin with them I almost died. Your face was gray and hard, Jim, when you went in. Like you expected to come out alone. Or not at all." She gestured toward her two faithful braves, George and Jake. "I told them to stand ready with their rifles. If there was a fight in the cabin, and those other two came out, leaving you behind, I told them to—to shoot them down like wolves."

"Did you, Kathleen?" He beamed upon her, with a new appreciation of her caliber. He examined the stolid braves with heightened respect. "Would they have done it?"

"They would, since I told them to. Even though they've been taught that white men are untouchable, like gods. The other Ileuts are timid, you know," she explained. "But George and Jake are fighting men. Father saved their lives, and I believe they would die for me, if necessary. Thank Heaven they didn't have to shoot. You came out of the cabin first."

Mark merely nodded. Mentally, for future reference, he checked the qualifications of this impassive pair. On the trail ahead there might be use for fighting men.

THE Ileuts were departing through the northern gap. Trask's renegades were pulling in. Even at a distance, the latter comprised a wild and evil-looking crew. Their furs were shaggy, their wolf dogs slinking and gaunt. Their sleds were long and low, packed light, and with protecting hides strapped down—the racing sleds of the interior hunters.

"They are bad, little one," George warned. "They are very bad. Some are Minooks. The broad ones with the long arms are Stiks. Must these fish eaters trail with us?"

"Hush," the girl reproved. "The trail is broad. They are nothing to us. They are packers for the big white man, who is now our friend."

"The trail will smell sweeter," returned George bluntly, "when they are far behind and the wind is in our faces."

Trask and Courtenay were out on the flat, pacing off the boundaries of their claims. When Mark joined them there, the big man spoke meaningly.

"We've decided to let you jump the discovery claim, Brent. It's probably cleaned out, anyway. And if there's any kick-back, you can

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carry the load. You'll be a long way off."

"On second thought," said Courtenay, examining the claim notice on the adjacent monument, "why not leave it as it is? Mark can't record it, in any event. Nobody knows the name, Ranger McCoy. As it appears now, when the diggings are discovered, the ground might have been worked over years ago. Except, of course, that there'll be a lot of equipment here pointing to a recent camp."

"Don't worry about that." Trask grinned. "I've told my savages to swing back this way from Circle. They'll pick the camp clean. Yeah, let it slide. The McCoy discovery it is."

Within the hour the entire party was drawn up, ready for the trail. Because George and Jake had crossed and recrossed Broken Tent during the preceding week, and were therefore familiar with the terrain, the former's team was in the lead. Behind Jake's sled came the girl's outfit, followed by Mark. Courtenay and Trask were next in line. Bringing up the rear came the ten sleds of the renegades.

It was an imposing array, extending in single file from the girl's cabin almost to the northern gap. There was a vast commotion as they got under way. The cracking of many dog whips, the shouts of the drivers, the harsh crackling of many sleds being broken out, reëchoed from the walls of the gloomy cleft. The line lengthened and shortened, twisting like a vast serpent across the snow.

Mark saw the girl glance about her mutely ere they quitted the canyon. Long she looked at a snow-covered mound at the base of the wall, where a rough cross was upreared. Her face turned toward it in passing; she looked back over her shoulder. Then, the first bend in the cleft intervening, she plodded on, clinging to the gee pole, the hood of her parka bowed.

In a sudden uprush of understanding that left his eyes blurred, Mark saw the world as she must see it now in the cold of dawn. Forbidding though this canyon was, it

KATHLEEN McCOY

yet held many associations that were near and dear to her. A loved one was there, left behind, hidden beneath the snow. She was now facing the vast and all but unexplored Outside, utterly and pitilessly alone.

Mark's dogs were trained to follow the team ahead once they were under way. He left them and strode forward to join Kathleen. He did not speak to her. He merely grasped her arm, pressed it gently, released it, and strode on at her side. She looked up at him and moved closer, so that their shoulders touched.

There were but two occasions, in their association in the North, that

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Mark was to see tears in her eyes. This was the first.

"It's cold—back there," she said. 'Some day I'm coming back for him to take him Outside. He was chained to the North. But he always wanted to be buried where there was sunshine—and flowers."

He could find no words to help her in this dark moment. Yet she seemed to draw comfort from his nearness. They were mounting higher now, toward the iron peaks; and presently, the shadowed canyon left behind, they emerged upon sunlight that was fiercely brilliant, but which brought no warmth.

She smiled upon him then, her head erect. Only in her eyes a trace of former shadows remained.

"I'm sorry, Jim. I thought I'd crossed that—that bridge before. I guess I'm not as strong as you supposed I was—as I supposed myself to be. But we'll forget it now. We're going Outside." Her face was upturned toward the heights. "Everything will be all right now, won't it?"

"Of course," he agreed.

His dogs, the going becoming rougher, had begun to fall back. This gave him an excuse to step aside from the trail and wait for the team to draw abreast. She waved her dog whip aloft.

"There'll be no more bridges," she called back cheerfully. "It's a promise. Thanks, Jim."

THUS began, for Mark, a haunting and poignantly beautiful interval destined to remain forever as a purple passage woven into a crowded record. The very unawareness of the girl, her absolute ignorance of the dark forces and passions swirling in the very air about her, gave each moment a truant and guilty zest.

Because his rôle required it, he spent as much time as possible with her, in camp and on the trail. Because eyes more keen than those of questing eagles were upon them, watching their every move, he was outwardly careless and at ease. Strangely, through a reckless, gambler's quirk of his nature, he felt at ease during those first two days. Nothing could be done until they had passed Broken Tent. The past was remote. Each moment, meanwhile, wherein he could hear her voice and see her face, was a treasure in itself.

Kathleen herself made no pretense of the fact that she clung to him in spirit. She had confidence in Trask and Courtenay, her manner proclaimed; yet, compared to Mark, they were utter strangers. She was alone in a camp of strangers, and in all the world; but because he was there she felt safe and secure.

Strange undercurrents, significant to Mark, swirled by her unobserved. She obviously gave no thought to the fact that Trask kept them both under observation at all times; and that wherever Trask was, Courtenay loomed like a shadow. She attributed no importance to the manner in which the gaps in the line were always kept closed, so that her team and George's—which hauled the gold—were never far in advance.

She spoke of this latter detail laughingly to Mark.

"They've certainly taken an interest in us since we left camp. They watch our sleds as carefully as they do their own."

"It's a responsibility," Mark agreed with an inner, grim chuckle. "They're that kind of men. Once they put their hands to it, they don't want anything to happen to the dust. I'll feel better myself

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when it's safely checked in at Circle."

"Nonsense," she returned. "What could happen to it with an army like this"

She did not notice, as Mark did, that the army was divided by night. Separate camps were made for Trask's renegades, apart from the main fire. This was not unusual, since the slovenly Stiks and Minooks not only preferred, but were required, to herd by themselves. Of significance was that fact that camp was always pitched in the shelter of a canyon, and that the twin fires of the renegades burned to right and left throughout the night.

These were strange and unforgetable hours beside the wavering flames—the restful interval before Kathleen retired to her shelter, the others rolled up in their blankets, and the long night grew still and cold beneath the flaming stars. Mark and the girl would sit side by side. Opposite, Trask's great bulk would loom. To the left, as at the third corner of a triangle, Courtenay would crouch alone.

The latter two would speak little to each other, or to Mark; but always, with a minute to minute vigilance that never relaxed, each of the three would be conscious of the other's slightest move. Should Courtenay stir the coals ever so idly, the hood of Trask's parka would turn toward him, as though drawn by a magnet. When Mark turned to peer carelessly into unplumbed blackness beyond the circle of light, he would sense Courtenay's unemotional gaze boring into his back.

Only the girl would be entirely at ease, unconscious of the ceaseless cross currents about her. She would talk on idly to Mark, smiling upon Trask and Courtenay when the theme became general. These two, to her, were but chance companions of the trail, good friends with whom they would part at Circle. She and Mark, meanwhile, were embarked upon a longer and more splendid trek, leading to the sunlit Outside.

And as she talked, her shadow would fall across two loaded sleds that were invariably drawn up close at hand. Emanating from beneath the lashed tarpaulins—unrecognized by her—was a sphere of influence that had the power to enter men's souls, turn friend against friend, and brother against brother, change the destinies of men and the course of empires.

CHAPTER X.

MYSTERY ON THE TRAIL.

ON the third afternoon, traveling hard, they achieved Broken Tent. They scaled the barrier during the dwindling hours, and at dusk emerged upon the western threshold.

Almost wistfully, Mark looked down upon the vast, turbulent sweep of the Yukon basin. With the pass behind them, the golden interval was almost over. One more night camp—not more than two at the most—and he must make his last and greatest effort in the girl's behalf. There was a certain canyon, just beyond the spot where Jim Colby was buried, that was made to order for the purpose he had in mind. It was less than a good day's travel distant.

Twilight still clung to the high pass, but the mighty gorges were choked with shadow. As his team dipped down, following the girl's into the depths, he thought he saw a point of light gleaming in the vastness of the benches below, like a fallen star. Forced to brake his sled on the steep descent, he could not stop to make sure; and though he

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peered fixedly in that direction, he did not see the light again.

Looking back, he was sure that Trask had noted nothing unusual. The big man's caution was that of a wolf whose jaws have closed firmly upon its kill. At the merest suspicion that an alien camp was between them and the Yukon, he would have halted the column and insisted upon an investigation before proceeding. When Courtenay raised no alarm from farther back in the line, Mark persuaded himself that he had seen no light, after all. It might have been merely the reflected sheen of the stars thrown back from some frozen stream bed.

They camped below the pass in a bleak, ice-walled gorge. It was not a promising spot, for fuel was scarce and the wind flowed ceaselessly, as through a chill corridor. They had no choice, so laborious had been the descent, and so swiftly had darkness overwhelmed them.

Kathleen, wearied by the strenuous haul, retired early to her shelter. Mark made no attempt to detain her, though he knew that this might easily be their last camp fire together. His eyes dwelt upon her face, illumined by the wavering flames, as she bade him a careless but affectionate good night. This was but another evening, her casual bearing proclaimed. There would be many more.

As the tarpaulin sheltering her cave settled into place, Mark squatted beside the fire, his back to the wind, and concentrated upon the morrow. He went over each step of the forthcoming campaign; rehearsed each gesture, each daring move. The drama, to be successful, must be letter-perfect. Above all, when the show-down came, he himself must not hesitate. At any momentary cost, no matter how severe, he must hew to the line. The sharpest blade was the most humane.

George and Jake were already rolled in the blankets, snoring. Trask was striding restlessly about the fire, head bowed, his bearded jaw outthrust. Courtenay, too, was on his feet, motionless, his hands thrust deep in his slitted parka; and as he became aware of something intent in the Englishman's bearing, Mark sensed new and unexplained forces in conflict about him.

He continued to stir the coals, apparently lost in thought. But from beneath lowered brows he studied Trask; and it came to him, as the latter's smoldering glance flitted ever and anon toward the loaded sleds, that he had failed fully to appraise the significance of their late crossing of Broken Tent.

For Trask, he saw now—belatedly—the Divide had been more than a physical barrier. Having passed it, they were within easy striking distance of Circle, and the big man's fingers were itching for the gold.

The realization was like the tightening of invisible chains about Mark. The whole success of his campaign—its sole and only chance—rested on their agreed program: that he would accompany Trask and Courtenay at least one day's haul beyond Broken Tent. Any divergence therefrom in any particular would be fatal. But what excuse could he give, what reasonable cause for demurring, if the big man's savage and cunning brain had conceived an alternate plan?

As though he had read his thoughts, Trask slowed his restless pacing to a halt beside him. He squatted at his right, shoulder to shoulder. Courtenay drew closer, noiselessly, and squatted at Mark's left.

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"Listen, Brent." The big man spoke in a harsh whisper, so that his words would not carry to the sleeping Ileuts or Kathleen's distant shelter. "When are you figuring on cutting back?"

"To-morrow night."

"Why not in the morning?"

Mark shook his head. "Can't be done. I've got to have time to work on the girl. Some of her stuff has got to be transferred to my sled. To sell her on the theory that she hasn't a choice, it's got to be staged right." He cocked an inquiring eye at the big man. "What's the hurry?"

"The hurry is that the lad who travels fastest travels alone. We're in the Yukon basin now. The sooner we split, the better. I say—pay off in the morning."

"And I say," Mark returned, staking all on a definite stand, "to-morrow night."

"To-morrow night it is," came Courtenay's quiet voice. "Mark's right. You're outvoted, Trask."

The big man reared up wrathfully to peer across Mark's back.

"Who asked your vote? You crazy, Court? Why ain't you standing with me, sight unseen?"

"Because I wasn't born yesterday, Trask, old boy," said the Englishman calmly. "I'm too old a campaigner not to keep my old nose upwind. Long as we have the pleasure of Brent's company, I stand with him. Our interests are alike. When he takes his split, I take mine. And travel alone. To put it frankly, Trask, you've too many renegades at your beck and call. It makes one feel—er—uncomfortable."

"So?" Trask sneered. "And since you're showing your hand, take a look at mine. One yell to my savages and the argument's over. We don't wait till morning. There's no further parley of any description. Eh?" He was rocking on his heels, teeth bared. "What's to prevent me from wiping the slate clean? I mean—right now?"

So quickly had smoldering flames burst forth that Mark was caught unprepared. His glance flitted toward his rifle. It was on his sled, which was five full paces distant. George and Jake, he knew, slept with rifles at their sides. They were close at hand.

His muscles were tensed to leap in that direction when Courtenay's voice, cold and contemptuous, told him that the situation was still under control.

"There are several reasons, Trask, old boy. Chief among them is your own precious hide. Certainly your savages could wipe us out, provided they have the stomach for close fighting—which I doubt. Meanwhile, Mark and I are determined men. I go armed—always. In fact, if Brent will move back a little, you're covered now, Trask."

Mark obligingly moved back. Courtenay's hands were still hidden. His parka, on the side toward Trask, bulged outward. Livid, the veins standing forth on his forehead, the big man crouched, motionless.

During a long moment in which the moan of the wind seemed unnaturally loud, they faced each other thus. Then the Englishman's thin lips relaxed in a mirthless smile.

"Tut, tut, Trask," said he. "You must learn to control your grasping instincts. It isn't cricket, you know. Be content with your share of the dust, rather than to risk losing all. Mark must have his share. I really can't think of giving up mine. Give him the time he requires to break the news to the lady. Her interests must be considered. All this was agreed to before we left the claim. Right?"

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An interruption occurred that saved Trask's face. Two of his renegades appeared in the circle of light. They were furtive and uneasy of bearing, their foul furs matted with snow.

"What is it?" growled Trask in the harsh Minook dialect. Because the language was intertwined with that of the Ileuts, Mark could follow it easily. "Why come you here, foolish sons of the skunk cabbage?"

"We have talk for your ear alone," said the spokesman humbly.

Trask arose with a muttered oath. Disregarding his companions and the late crisis, he strode into the darkness with the two renegades.

"Best get your rifle, Brent," suggested the Englishman. "I'll get mine, too. Perhaps it would be discreet to stand away from the fire for a moment. Until we see what develops."

They took up their positions in the gloom beyond the sleds. After a moment the Englishman chuckled softly.

"I have few scruples myself, you understand, Mark," said he. "But Trask goes against the grain at times. He does, really. In so far as there is honor among thieves, I assure you that I propose to see all bargains kept. In return I will expect you to help me guard my interests."

"As between you and Trask," said Mark. "I'm with you. I can't promise more than that."

"That," returned the other, "is sufficient."

A guttural parley had been in progress at the camp of renegades on the west, or Yukon, end of the canyon. This was the group Trask had joined. Two figures presently loomed up in silhouette against the farther stars. No dogs accompanied them. They were traveling light, their rifles sloping. At the shambling pace of the iron-muscled Indian runner, they faded from view.

Shortly Trask returned. He strode into the circle, brows lowered in thought. Because he was alone and unarmed, Mark and Courtenay came forth from the shadow.

"Hell's popping," said the big man, peering from one to the other. "Somebody ahead of us on the trail."

"So?" said Courtenay softly. "How far ahead?"

"We don't know. My savages claim they saw a camp fire from the pass. They scouted around on their own account before reporting it, blast 'em! They couldn't spot it again. I've sent a couple of runners ahead. Told 'em to keep going till they met up with these mushers, to look 'em over, and to hurry back. Some of the old heads figure they're maybe a day's run away. If so, these scouts ought to be back by morning. They cover plenty distance on a sprint like that, traveling light."

"Hm-m-m," said Courtenay. "Is it possible that a stampede has started from Circle, and these are old-timers going up to the Porcupine by way of Broken Tent?"

"They might be a posse from Eagle," said Trask, looking hard at Mark. "The commissioner isn't going to let any grass grow under his feet, running down the lad who slaughtered Corliss. Not to start any more arguments with you fire eaters"—he spoke sneeringly, as Mark remained silent—"do we want to meet up with *any one* as long as we've got the girl on our hands? One of you wise heads answer that."

"True," said Courtenay. "It would be—ah—embarrassing, whoever they are. What do you say, Mark, old man? There's your own

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interest to consider, of course. Even if they're stampeders from Circle, they wouldn't hesitate to take you into custody. Perhaps in the morning——"

Mark seized upon this lead. It was plain that Courtenay, too, wished to postpone the division of forces as long as possible. Yet his own insistence upon proceeding, in face of the risk involved, must appear logical to both.

"Let's wait till morning," said he. "Your scouts will be back by that time, Trask, and we'll have a line on these lads ahead. If they're far enough away, we can push on. Somewhere down the line, if necessary, we can leave the trail and strike off to the north. From there you two can cross the benches to Circle, while I—we—turn back."

"For the purposes of the record, Brent," said Trask, "answer me this: Why are you so gosh-awful anxious to stick with us when you know there's grief ahead? Whoever these mushers are, if *you* meet 'em, you're sunk. If you're playing the cards according to Hoyle, why ain't you in a lather to turn back while you've got a clear trail over Broken Tent? No argument, you understand." His smoldering gaze was intent. "It's just for the benefit of my curious an' undernourished intellect."

It was the precise question Mark had labored strenuously to avoid. Yet he had his answer ready. He looked to Courtenay to back his play.

"I'll tell you why, Trask. Put yourself in my shoes and you'll see it. I can't have either a posse or a bunch of wild-eyed stampeders a day's run behind me when Kathleen and I cross back into the Porcupine. If I was alone, I could make a run for it and take my chances. But a woman can't stand up on a long haul. Our chances are better if I lay low for a while this side of the mountains. When the excitement has died a little, we can sneak across some night and be in the clear. Got the picture?"

Trask continued to eye him fixedly, suspicious still. To Mark's immense relief, Courtenay nodded his approval.

"Reasonable enough," said he.

Trask shrugged his shoulders.

"Let's roll in, then," he growled. "We'll give the cards a look again in the morning, when those scouts get back."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SHOW-DOWN.

THE scouts had not returned in the morning. As they breakfasted in the chill half light, Trask's bearing was uneasy, suspicious, truculent. He crossed and recrossed many times between the camps of his renegades, holding many guarded conferences. His impatience mounted with each passing moment.

He sent scouts to the ridge ahead to watch for the missing scouts. Still they did not come.

The long line waited, packed and ready for the trail. Mark explained to the girl the cause of the delay, making the circumstances seem of minor importance. If stampeders were ahead, he told her, they would swing north from the trail to avoid them. They would know soon. George and Jake stood beside their teams impassively, puffing on their foul and beloved pipes. Courtenay was aloof, still-faced, the iron nerve of the man revealing no hint of suspense or anxiety.

When the sunlight was glinting coldly on the heights, Trask beckoned the other two aside. His

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watchers on the ridge had reported no sign of the missing runners. Should they take chances and push on?

"Why not?" said Courtenay. "The fact that your savages haven't returned suggests that this strange camp must be farther away than we had supposed."

"What's to be gained by waiting for your scouts here?" Mark pointed out. "We'll meet 'em on the way back. I'm for pushing on."

That he and Courtenay were agreed seemed to increase Trask's uneasiness. He eyed them intently.

"I can't figure you bozos. Don't you savvy that we've got better than a hundred and fifty thousand in dust with us? How do we know who these pilgrims are? What's your game?"

Mark looked at Courtenay. The latter raised a supercilious eyebrow.

"'Conscience,'" he answered, "'doth make cowards of us all.' What ghosts are these, friend Trask? Put half your savages at the head of the line, if you wish. Lead them yourself. That should be sufficient guarantee against"—he shrugged his shoulders—"whatever you happen to be fearing at the moment."

"And leave you two behind with the loot?" The big man sneered. "Come again, fellow!"

"Bah!" said Courtenay. For the first time irritation showed in his precise words. "Mark, old man, this person's weasel point of view is too much for me. We'll split the dust now. Let him take his share and stay here until the spring thaw. Let him go back over the pass. Let him sprout wings and fly. You and I, meanwhile, will carry on. Right?"

Mark sensed intuitively that this was a bluff, that the Englishman was certain in his own mind that Trask would not agree to it. He himself was sure that Trask would refuse. The big man still dreamed, plainly enough, of sharing the treasure with nobody. His present apprehensions and suspicions arose from the belief that they, too, planned a similar coup.

And yet, because he could not afford the long chance that Trask would call the bluff, and thus precipitate an immediate show-down, Mark hurried to advance a substitute proposal.

"No, Court," said he. "But let's ease his mind. You lead the column with half of Trask's savages. Let Trask bring up the rear with the rest of them. That guards us against surprise in front. It also guarantees that nobody falls out of line and drops back. Fair enough?"

"And leave you traveling with the dust, eh?" said Trask.

"Use your head, old son." Mark addressed the big man with outward contempt, but with an inner marshaling of resources. "There's a big weight of gold on those two sleds. Your renegades are packed light. What chance would we have to outrun you, even if we were foolish enough to make a break for it?"

Courtenay cast a piercing glance upon him. Momentarily—it was a long and crucial moment for Mark—the Englishman hesitated. Then he nodded.

"He's right, Trask. I take the lead. You guard the rear. Mark, the lady, and the gold are in the middle of the column. That should surely satisfy all your—ah—bizarre whims." He spread his hands. "Let's go, eh?"

"Let's go," Trask agreed ominously. "But just so we understand each other, sink your teeth in this. I'm talking to both of you. Remember, *I'm* watching the dust."

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Mark knew an inner, grim relief as the column re-formed, placing Courtenay in the lead. In the dark cross currents swirling about him, he had clung stubbornly to his course. More than that had emerged from those delicately suspended forces, he saw now. He had actually bettered his hand. The enemy was now divided—Courtenay at one end of the column, Trask at the other. If he could hold his advantage, if he could keep the marching order intact until they had approached that certain canyon, just beyond the gulch where Jim Colby was buried——

He closed his mind to the moment, and what lay beyond. Methodically he made preparations for it. He contrived, while the line was being reassembled, to achieve the marching order he wanted among four certain sleds. He placed Jake's team in the lead, as among these four. Kathleen followed, then came George, then himself.

Both Ileuts, as Kathleen had said, were fighting men. They were also blood brothers. But George, the leader of the two, owed a debt to the girl. He had said: "We shall be faithful to the end." He, Mark, would have need of such a one close at hand when the show-down came.

THE two Minook runners whom Trask had sent in advance were never encountered. This fact caused increasing vigilance as the hours passed. There were frequent stops while scouts went forward to spy on the land. Then, the way being reported clear, the column would move on.

At each of these halts Trask would stride forward for a conference with Courtenay. In late afternoon, after a longer delay than usual, he returned, scowling with thought. He fell in beside Mark as the column got under way.

"Those mangy Minooks of mine have probably double-crossed us, blast 'em!" he growled. "Pulled their freight and kept traveling. It's the only way I can figure it. To blazes with the shifty-eyed snakes! But it leaves us up in the air. Court thinks we ought to camp pretty quick now, make our split, and scatter. You know this trail. Any likely spot ahead?"

"A little farther on," said Mark. "It's the only decent place in miles. I'll give you the word when we get close to it. You can send one of your savages ahead to tell Court."

Dusk was gathering in the lower levels when the column dipped down into a narrow canyon where there was a frozen stream bed flanked by a tiny flat. Mark saw Courtenay, far in the lead, turn aside to examine an equipment cache that was surmounted by a blazed marker. The Englishman took a folded paper from beneath the topmost stone, read it, thrust it in his pocket, and strode on.

Kathleen looked over her shoulder at Mark as they crossed the flat. Her smiling gesture indicated that for them it was a significant spot. It was here that they had first met, less than ten days before.

For Mark the place and moment and a deeper significance. A cycle of his life had begun here. Within the hour, less than three miles distant, the cycle would end. This time, when Jim Colby passed from the picture, he would never return.

A long glacial groove led down beyond the ridge. It's unscalable walls were pierced by but one canyon, he remembered. The latter canyon led north, toward the benches; rising up gradually to merge into the vast, turbulent pla-

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teau flanking the great bend of the Yukon. It was toward this point—where canyon and glacial groove met—that he had been forging in spirit since the first.

Meanwhile, before the forks of the trail, there was work to do.

He left his dogs to follow along, went ahead and fell into step beside George. The trail was broad here, because many sleds had preceded them. As he strode side by side with the impassive brave for a space, he could hear his own heart beating.

"George," said he in the Ileut dialent, using a figure of speech common to the language, "there are many strange tracks in the snow."

He had not mistaken his man. The stolid native did not start, nor evince surprise. But his beady eyes were intent.

"And many strange hunters are abroad," he returned. "Who are you that has called himself Boss Jim?"

"I am not Boss Jim," said Mark. "I am not a chechahco. I have seen many winters in the North. I understand the way of wolves, of white men, and of mighty hunters of the the Ileuts. Look, George. I can not tell you why I am here, nor why I have persuaded the little one that I am Boss Jim. The story is too long and the time is short. I will tell you this. You and Jake, your blood brother, have sworn that you will stand at the little one's side and protect her to the end. Because I, too, have sworn it, we are three of the same mind. Do you believe me?"

"I have seen the look in your eyes of the brave who has found a squaw that pleases him," said George shrewdly. "But you are also a white man, and the little one has much gold."

"Listen, then," said Mark. "I will prove to you that I speak truth. This big one, Trask, and the one called Courtenay, are very bad men. Before we left the Little Muddy they would have killed you and the little one and divided the gold between them."

GEORGE nodded, his broad face expressionless. "We have known from the first that they were not to be trusted. We thought you were blind because you were a chechahco. The little one, because she had faith in you, was also blind. But we have slept each night with our rifles beside us."

"Because we were but three, and they and their fish eaters were many," said Mark, "I have used cunning. I have persuaded them to come this far on the trail. To-night, when we make camp, it is agreed that we will divide the gold. But before we come to the place to make camp, there is yet a chance to save the little one. I have a plan. To carry it out, I will give my life, if that is necessary. In exchange for her safety, my life means nothing. Is that the talk of one who has thought only of the gold?"

"Let us hear the plan," returned the stolid native. "It will speak louder than much talk."

"Three bends more, or perhaps four," said Mark, "there is a canyon that turns to the right. Presently Jake will make his dogs go slower, so that there will be a space between his team and the next team ahead of him. When he comes to the canyon, he will turn into it, whipping his dogs to a fast run. The little one will follow, then you, and I will be last. There will be a great confusion and much trouble. But it is a narrow canyon, and I will stop there with my rifle. You

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and Jake will hurry on with the little one while I hold these renegade white men and these fish eaters back. You will go up to the benches and swing to the southwest."

"There are many runners among the fish eaters," the other objected. White men, where there is gold, are wolves on the trail. They will scatter and go around the canyon. They will follow us to the benches, run us down, and surround us."

"No," said Mark. "I know the ways of white men, and my plan sees farther than I have said. First there will be a battle in the canyon. Then, when they find they cannot pass, they will make big talk, hoping that I will see eye to eye with them. When this fails, they will try to go around. But to do this, because the walls are too steep for dogs, they must go back up the trail, or many miles down. Meanwhile, it is night. You have a long lead. Your trail cannot be found until morning. You will make long hauls and cold camps, driving your dogs to their last strength, until you reach Circle."

Again, Mark saw, he had not mistaken his man. Having absorbed the facts, George did not hesitate.

"You have spoken truth," said he. "We are three. The plan is good."

"Go forward quickly, then, and explain these things to Jake," Mark directed. "Then come back, and I will talk to the little one. Look, George. There is one thing more. I cannot tell the little one all that I have told you. And there will be no time for talk when the trouble begins. When she finds that I must remain behind, she may refuse to leave the canyon. You and Jake must then take her by force. Later, on the trail to Circle, you will tell her why you have done this. Understand?"

"I understand," said George. "It is for her own safety. She is unafraid, but her heart is not to be trusted. Later, if you live, you will join her at Circle." He nodded. "You are a brave man, my friend."

Mark knew that he had not measured up to this latter tribute. He had the courage to face death, but not Kathleen's disillusionment. If he told her of the nature of the show-down ahead, he must tell her all, and he shrank from this as he shrank from no hazard that life could hold. Later, perhaps—so he excused himself—he would send down a letter by trusted messenger from the wilds. If he survived. If not, the record would tell the story.

When George came back and reported that Jake was ready for the attempt, Mark strode forward to the girl's side.

"We've decided to split up the party," he told her, in a matter-of-fact way. "There's too many of us. If there's stampeders ahead, it's bound to attract attention. So Trask and Courtenay are going on with their savages. We'll swing to the right, at the next canyon, and cut across the benches. It's a rougher trail, but safe from the main travel. Good idea, don't you think?"

"Fine," she said. "I'm sure we'll get along."

To her it was a casual moment. To him, it was final.

"When we turn off, keep going fast. It's a steep grade up to the benches, as I recall it. The dogs ought to hit it on the run."

"O. K.," she agreed lightly.

He stepped aside and waited for his team to draw abreast. George swung close to him in passing.

"The little one is ready?"

"All ready. Remember, my friend —long hauls—cold camps. Do not spare the dogs."

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"Good hunting," returned the stolid brave.

Twilight was deepening in the great cleft as they rounded the last bend and so came into view of the break in the wall. Courtenay, in the lead, was already past the canyon mouth. One by one his trailing renegades filed by. The segment of the trail between Jake's team and the next ahead lengthened slowly.

Mark slowed down his own dogs so that George, too, might have a slight lead when the dash began. He had already contrived, unnoticed in the gathering shadows, to strap his cartridge belt about his waist. He leaned over now, as the sled whined on, and drew his rifle surreptitiously from its scabbard.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BATTLE IN THE CANYON.

TRASK was next in line behind Mark. The latter, risking a single glance over his shoulder, saw the giant plodding behind his sled, head bowed. Obviously, for him, the moment held no import. The groove seemed endless. Except to eyes that knew the trail, the break in the wall was hidden. The lengthening gap in the line ahead of Jake was not yet noticeable.

Mark's rifle was held in his right hand. He laid the weapon along the gee pole, grasping both with his long, mittened fingers. His left hand gripped tighter on his dog whip. His eyes were ahead now, fixed upon a scene whose every detail seemed bold and sharply etched, even in the half light, but every aroused nerve and fiber of his being was concentrated on the rear.

Jake's team swung to the right. Dog by dog it disappeared as into the solid wall. Kathleen's followed. The lash of her whip curled up and out as she slid from view. The lead dog of George's team has just swung wide, when Trask's voice came, astonished and wrathful:

"What's the idea, Brent? What's going on here?"

Mark pointed with his dog whip. "I thought Court knew the trail. We swing to the right, up the canyon."

"Halt your blasted Ileuts, then! Stop the girl!" There was a sudden, strident note in his voice: "Pull up, Brent!"

Mark spoke sharply to his dogs, swinging them in. His whiplash exploded above their galloping backs. Jake's team was already past the first bend in the tortuous, ever-mounting cleft. The girl was just forging by, her head on her shoulder. This much Mark saw as he threw his whip upon the sled and whirled with his rifle.

He fired into the snow, directly at the feet of Trask's lead dog. The whole team halted in mid-stride, flinching back before the flash, the roar, and the engulfing snow thrown up by the impact of the high-powered bullet. They turned upon themselves, scrambling, entangled in harness, and the sled ran them down. Succeeding sleds, carried on by their own momentum, bored into the mêlée. In the twinkling of an eye the trail was jammed.

Trask rose up, bellowing. His mitten flew as he jerked his rifle to his shoulder. Running backward, Mark fired from the hip. The big man dropped to the shelter of his sled and returned the fire. His renegades swarmed to his side. A crashing fusillade reverberated in the cleft, the echoes rolling out and out into the deepening night.

Through a hail of bullets that ricocheted from the ice-sheathed rock about him and whined on into re-

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mote distance, Mark followed his galloping dogs around the bend. He halted them at the base of the wall, forcing them to lie down. In a near frenzy from the uproar that had exploded so suddenly about them, the team was yet under control. Ears flattened, hackles erect, they crouched at command, trembling.

Mark leaped to the outjutting shoulders of the bend. He flung himself prone and inched forward. He glanced back once, up the canyon, and saw that George and Jake were in difficulties. It had not been easy to take Kathleen by force, after all. Her sled was drawn up beside George's. She was facing that determined native. From behind, half crouching, his arms hanging loosely, Jake was approaching stealthily upon her.

Mark had no time to see more. The moment he showed himself ever so slightly beyond the corner, a hail of bullets blasted snow in his face. Others splattered viciously against the protecting shoulder. He stood up, exposed arm and weapon in a sudden motion, fired once at the attackers, and dropped down again. In that glimpse of the gap, he saw Courtenay's renegades leaping across the opening to join the others.

ON the face of the opposite promontory, where the canyon met the mighty groove, he glimpsed one of Trask's savages mounting upward. The edge of his furs bulged at intervals, in silhouette against the sky, then sank from view. Again movement was discernible, higher up. His objective, plainly enough, was a narrow ledge that extended along the face of the wall. From this ledge, could he advance unobserved along it, a flank attack could be made upon the besieged.

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Pretending not to notice this daring sniper, who apparently believed himself to be hidden entirely from view, Mark waited for him to achieve the ledge and thus offer a better target. That moment came. The renegade, raising himself up cautiously to reconnoiter, had exposed his left shoulder and arm. From a prone position, Mark brought up his weapon and took careful aim.

But before he could pull the trigger, a rifle roared at his back. The crouching Indian leaped up and out, fell backward from view.

"Fish eater!" came George's voice, guttural with satisfaction. "He will hunt no more, that one!"

Mark whirled. The girl crouched against the wall, close at hand, her face a white patch in the gloom. George and Jake were beyond her, the latter's rifle still smoking.

"What is this?" Mark demanded sternly. "Have you forgotten the plan? Take her away—quickly! There is no time to be lost."

"The little one has become a wild cat," returned the stolid brave. "A she-wolf armed with fangs. She can neither be led nor driven. She will not listen to our talk. Perhaps she will listen to you."

"Please go, Kathleen." Mark put all his force into the appeal. "Don't wait. Believe me when I say that every minute counts. George will explain everything to you."

Instead, the girl crept closer. All four were flattened against the wall, in the narrow angle of protection afforded by the outjutting shoulder. She pressed against Mark's side. Her upturned face was deathly pale, her eyes luminous. Yet she seemed unafraid.

"What is it, Jim? What's it all about? No, don't argue. I don't care how precious each minute is. I want to know what you're doing, and why. I'm not going until I find out, no matter what happens."

Her determination showed in her words. Even though, in the stress of the moment, she had not grasped the significance of his interchange with George—that he was able to talk to the Ileut in his own tongue—Mark knew that his house of cards had collapsed.

Yet—desperately—he made a final attempt to forestall disaster.

"This is the picture, Kathleen," he spoke swiftly. "Trask and Courtenay are two of the hardest characters in the North. They've planned from the first to take your gold. They wanted to split the dust before we left the Little Muddy, jump your claim, turn you over to Trask's renegades, and call it a day. Instead, I persuaded them it would be safer to come this far. I did it deliberately, remembering this canyon. I can hold them off here, while you and George and Jake push on to Circle. I can't hold them long. A few hours, at most. But it'll give you a good lead. By mushing hard, you can make it."

He had hoped that the very bluntness with which he stated the facts would do the trick. She absorbed the shock of it without a quiver.

"But what will become of you?"

"I'll follow along—later."

She shook her head. "I'm not a child, Jim. You haven't a chance. Those men are desperate. Please"—she laid a hand on his arm—"don't argue with *me*. I'm staying. So are George and Jake. When we leave, we leave together. What's the gold to us? Let them have it."

SHE was as immovable, in spirit, as the rock at her back. Mark saw that at last, all other recourse having failed, he must hew to the line. Only by utterly destroy-

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ing her trust in him, could he persuade her to accept her sole chance of survival.

The canyon was quiet. He peered past the shoulder of rock to investigate. Twin tongues of flame leaped forth from the distant shadows. The bullets punctured the air less than arm's length distant, whined on to bury themselves in the farther slope. The rolling echoes merged into a silence more ominous than before.

Two riflemen were guarding the canyon, it was plain. The others were either holding a council of war, or had already deployed to right and left, mushing hard to encircle them and cut them off. There was no time to be lost.

"I hate to tell you this, Kathleen." He was thankful, in that terrific moment, that the light was dim. "It has to be done. I'm not Jim Colby."

She looked at him fixedly. It was plain that his words had meant nothing.

"I'm not Jim Colby," Mark repeated. "I buried him in that canyon back yonder. Beside the creek. Where we first met. It was just before you came. You remember you thought I had broken through the ice? Jim Colby had broken through. He was frozen when I found him. You had never met him. It was easy for you to suppose that I was he. I let you think so. It was easy to pass myself off as Colby. I'd read the letter that your father had written——"

His voice trailed away, in the face of her utter disbelief. Her hand was still on his arm. He could feel it tremble.

"You're talking wildly, Jim. Who do you think you are?" Over her shoulder she spoke hurriedly to George: "His talk is the talk of one whose mind is sick. Be ready to take him by force, when I give the word."

"My mind is not sick," said Mark, in the Ileut dialect. "I have spoken the truth."

She withdrew her hand from his arm. Moment by moment, as the impact of what he had just said sank home, she shrank still farther from him. No force of logic or persuasion could have been as effective as the knowledge that he could speak —and had spoken before—in a language no chechahco could understand.

"Who are you, then?" The words came as little more than a whisper.

"I'm a wanted man," said Mark. "I'm a cutthroat of the same stamp as Trask and Courtenay. When you get to Circle, you'll hear all about me. The name is Brent. Don't ask why I posed as Colby. Don't ask me anything. Just thank whatever stars you believe in that you've got the chance your father asked for—to get safely to the river.

"That's all." In spite of his resolution, his voice shook. His throat felt dry. "Run along, Kathleen. Good luck. Good-by."

To George he said: "She will go now. Guard her carefully on the trail. Mush hard."

This time, when George laid hold on her arm and drew her away, she did not protest. He spoke to her encouragingly, leading her along the wall. Jake urged more speed. Their muttered interchange dwindled as they passed one by one around the farther bend. Though Mark strained his eyes through a darkness that seemed suddenly to grow more profound, he did not see her again.

They made a quiet start. No sound of cracking dog whips came down through the cleft. The creak of sled runners made a distant whisper that merged presently into the

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eternal sighing of the wind. They were gone.

Had the attackers stormed the pass then, the stronghold must have fallen. It was as though the sentry slept. For a long time after he was left alone, Mark stood with his back to the wall, head bowed, immobile, his rifle leaning unnoticed against the insensate rock beside him.

CHAPTER XIII.

END OF THE TRAIL.

HE was roused by the worried whining of his dogs and the knowledge that his hands and feet were stiffening slowly in the intense cold. The canyon was dark now, except for the frigid glitter of starlight on snow and icy pinnacle. A strange stillness was abroad, a lack of sound that was like a cessation of life, as though he stood alone in the utter desolation of winter night.

He peered past the corner and poised, listening. He knew that but a few minutes had elapsed, not more than a half hour at most, since the girl and her two Ileuts had departed. Yet the watchers at the gap, too, seemed to be gone. No challenging shot reëchoed. No blacker shadows moved against the farther darkness. All about, except for the whisper of the wind in the higher crags, was the vast and imposing silence of the peaks.

Striding back and forth along the wall, he stamped his feet and flailed his arms to restore the sluggish circulation. He poised at intervals, listening; and once thought he heard a distant uproar. It seemed to come from below the gap, from far down the trail—a confused jumble of men's voices raised in argument; of strident, excited yells. But even as he strained his ears, trying to identify these confused murmurs, a new gust of wind rolled down from the north and swept them away.

He told himself that each passing moment was a victory. The girl was plunging farther into the night, into the far-flung trackless sanctuary of the benches. Just so the canyon was held, it made no difference what plan of campaign the enemy followed. North toward Broken Tent or south toward the flats, there was no break in the wall for miles. And should Trask and Courtenay achieve the benches, many hours must intervene before they could pick up the trail.

Yet the oppressive silence, the inactivity, bore heavily upon him. His was the mounting impatience of a weary toiler who glimpses the end of his task and yearns to have done with it. If the enemy was actually gone, why was he waiting here?

He boldly passed the corner and stood, flattened against the wall. He went forward toward the gap, step by step, his rifle poised and ready. Through the shadow he moved, searching the farther shadows. There was nothing there; and presently he stood at the gap, alone.

The mighty groove was deserted. As far as he could see, to north and south, no sight or sound of life was abroad. The light was too dim to read signs in the trampled snow at the gap itself. Whether his enemies had split their forces or were raging in pursuit as a body, could not be told. They might even have abandoned pursuit, given up all idea of regaining the treasure.

This last was not unlikely. Circle City was not far away, as distances went in the North. A few hours' start, with good dogs, would be all that the girl required. Courtenay would see this. Trask might rebel, being of less caliber as a gambler, but the Englishman's cold unemo-

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tional judgment would tell him that the game was up. Mark could almost see the inscrutable one's nonchalant shrug of the shoulders as he interpreted the verdict to the raging giant. The stakes had been huge. The flirt of a card in the hands of a desperate player had decided the issue. They had lost; and what of it?

Mark returned to his dogs. They rose up to whine about him hungrily, questioning ears alert. He did not feed them. There might be trail work yet, before the end of the haul was reached. Only the promise of food could keep them going now. He harried them into line, broke out the sled and moved up the canyon.

HE halted at the benches, a mile above, and looked back into the dark gorge. To copper all bets, he told himself listlessly, he should remain on guard yet a while longer. He stamped back and forth, flailing his arms. He halted at intervals, listening; and at one of these intervals, as incredibly as though the wilderness itself had spoken, calling his name, he heard a distant voice.

Faint and frail it was, muted to a tiny echo:

"Brent! I say—Brent!"

It was Courtenay's voice, calling from the gap. Plainly enough, Trask and the Englishman had decided upon a last effort. On the chance that something could be accomplished through parley, or that all four of their quarry were still in the canyon, they had returned to the scene of battle.

Mark smiled grimly and made no reply. Let them think what they choose, he decided; the advantage now lay all with him. If they advanced into the canyon, cautious step by step, he could still hold them here. If they gave it up, deciding that the birds had flown, so much the better.

He listened, holding his breath; but the challenging call did not come again. He waited an hour, prepared momentarily for the sound of stealthy approach, magnified by the inclosing canyon walls. The unbroken silence of the black gorge below was that of a tomb.

No use to wait longer. The girl was far away, forging on and on into the void. The enemy were far in the rear. He had no further interest in either now, nor in all the world. His work was done, in short; the chapter closed. It was time to go.

He roused up his dogs again, broke forth the sled, and for a space followed the thin trail left by the two Ileuts and the girl. He told himself that he was following this trail merely to see that it held on undeviatingly, that nothing had occurred to halt their flight. But this excuse failed when the tracks dipped down into a narrow gorge that bore sharply to the left, or southwest. That way led toward Circle City. His way led north, toward the mountains.

For a long time, he stood at the forks of the trail, following the tracks to the left as far as his eye could see. Then he turned to the right, skirting the canyon's edge, and did not look back again.

The wind was keen and cold across the benches. The dogs labored wearily. Far ahead, as a giant step leading up to the iron peaks, was the face of a great cliff. Many blind canyons pierced this rampart. He bore toward the nearest of these and presently stood upon the threshold.

It was dangerous, for one in perpetual danger of pursuit, to make camp in such a place. It was a

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pocket, a hole in the wall. If the enemy stood at the threshold, escape would be cut off.

And yet, there was no danger. Where no promise of life beckoned, no hazard remained. He knew now, without surprise or regret, that he had reached a decision. He would never cross the mountains, nor face winter in the barrens, nor struggle on any farther. His trail ended here.

He pushed his way through the gnarled, scrub timber that clothed the bottom of the ravine. Where the pocket ended and the sheer wall began, he halted the sled, unharnessed and fed the dogs. Though a spark within him—the will to live—had died, three things of promise yet remained in life. He was cold, hungry, and utterly weary. He would build a roaring fire, eat heartily, and enjoy the primal luxury of deep sleep. This much life owed to him, before the account was closed.

Later, well-fed, he lay propped on his elbow, puffing on his pipe. There was no wind here, and even its sighing whisper was remote in the heights above. The light of the fire was thrown back in jeweled radiance from the frosty walls. Heat, too, was reflected back, so that his blankets were saturated and he was warm at last, to the very marrow and soul of him.

THE dogs were quiet in the farther gloom. Beyond, less than a stone's throw distant, the mouth of the canyon was a frame to a mighty picture. A segment of the benches was in view, and the far-off basin of the Yukon. Higher still and farther was the gleam of remote peaks, reared like frozen, foam-crested billows against the sky. Over all was the flaming majesty of the stars.

He considered the scene lazily, puffing on his pipe. Here, before him, was the North, the Yukon, the frozen sub-arctic wastes through which his puny trail had threaded these long six years. He was looking his last upon it. Not again would his very soul thrill to the tremendous and terrible beauty of the barrens by night. He would see one more dawn. Thereafter, while others toiled and drank and made big talk, he would be out and away.

Whither? He neither knew nor cared. When the key to the riddle of life had eluded him, why ponder the inscrutable mysteries of death? Once before, that morning at Birch Creek, he had faced this trail. It had been a desperate impulse then, a stubborn gesture of rebellion against life and the harsh realities of life. Now, at ease, he was facing it again—carelessly, in tranquillity of spirit, as a good gambler should.

There would be regrets, of course, when the moment came. This was but natural, since the yearnings and groping dreams making up the thing called life would persist to the end. Those plaintive voices would be stilled only when the flesh that housed them was still. To counterbalance their dim, vague protest, he had had many rich experiences. Had he taken the trail at Birch Creek, he would have missed the most precious and flawless of all—the privilege of knowing Kathleen.

He piled on more fuel, so that the cleft became a well of radiance in the night. That this was a reckless gesture made but a vague impression upon his lazy, exalted mood. The fire itself could not be seen, being shielded by the underbrush at the gap, but the illuminated threshold could be visible for miles. What of it? He would leave this canyon at his own pleasure, at his own time.

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When he did so, he could pass, untouched, through all the posses and man hunters and armies of the world.

He cleaned his rifle methodically, thinking of Kathleen. He squinted down the barrel, noting with pride how it gleamed and scintillated with iridescent light. He ejected the shells from the magazine, refilled it again and lowered the hammer on the empty chamber.

He had just laid the weapon down, nestling it among the blankets on the side toward the fire, when his eye caught movement through the gap. He looked closer, then stood up for a better view.

A dog team, having mounted abruptly into view from the lower depths, was approaching directly toward him. It was following his own trial. Because the snowy expanse of the great bench caught and held the light of the stars, he could see the team plainly.

The dogs were tired. The leader's plumed tail was still erect, but its head was lowered and its mighty, padded forelegs straddled drunkenly. The furred figure of the driver was also bowed, the dog whip trailing. No other outfits rose up from the depths. Whoever this weary but stubborn pursuer was, he traveled alone.

Having satisfied himself of this latter fact, Mark stooped and took up his rifle. He slid a shell into the chamber, manipulating the lever softly. He moved to the left and knelt in the protection of his sled, the weapon across his knees.

The approaching dogs came boldly, rashly, to the very entrance of the cleft. Only when Mark's dogs snarled a challenge did the leader halt, looking back over its shoulder. When no command came, the weary dog lay down in the snow. The others followed suit. The driver, placing a mittened hand upon the sled for support, came forward slowly.

"You're close enough," said Mark. It was not necessary to raise his voice, so quiet was the cleft. "Stop where you are."

The other obediently halted and stood, swaying a little. Even before his challenge was answered, Mark knew that life, and the responsibilities, privileges, and poignant regrets of life could not thus easily be brushed aside.

"Please—I want to come in." The words were low and trembling. "If I may. It is I—Kathleen."

Mark leaned the rifle against the sled and rose up.

"Come in, by all means," said he. "Wait, I'll help you."

He strode past the fire and past his dogs. He laid hold on her arm. When he found that she was trembling violently, either through fear, cold, or from utter weariness, he placed his arm about her to hold her up. It was not necessary to menace his dogs back. Recognizing her, they whined a welcome.

He helped her into the sphere of warmth about the fire. He made a place for her and lowered her to it gently. Kneeling beside her, he drew off her mittens. Her hands were bloodless and cold. He rubbed them first with snow, then massaged them between his own hands until they flushed slowly with returning circulation.

"Keep your feet away from the fire for a while," he directed. "Otherwise they'll hurt plenty before they thaw out."

Obediently she drew her feet beneath her, covering them with the skirt of her parka. He took up a Hudson Bay robe and wrapped it about her, swathing her to the waist.

"Don't you know it's too cold to

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be on the trail to-night?" He spoke with mock sternness. "But you'll be warm in a jiffy now."

All the while, her eyes had been fixed upon his face. Her gaze followed him as he seated himself cross-legged upon his blankets. Under his gentleness, his matter-of-fact manner, her trembling had ceased. As he looked at her now, smilingly, it was as though something strained and terrified and desperate within her gave way. She bowed herself a little farther forward, so that her head was buried in her arms.

CHAPTER XIV.

A HARD DECISION.

MARK spoke no word to her for a space, giving her time to compose herself. He stirred the embers with a charred stick, and piled on more fuel. Sparks showered upward. The light of the leaping flames was thrown back in new radiance from the frosty walls. He filled his pipe, looking out through the cleft.

"Fed your dogs?"

She shook her head. He arose and went out to the team, unharnessed and fed them. He stood guard while they devoured their trail rations, protecting them from the onslaught of his own dogs. When the last fragment of dried fish had been demolished, he returned to the fire, seated himself, and lighted his pipe with a glowing coal.

"Well?" he demanded, peering at her through the billowing smoke.

Her head was erect now, the hood of her parka thrown back. The slow flush of her cheeks was like a return of life. Her eyes dwelt upon his face, her manner apparently as placid as his own.

"Well?" she retorted smilingly.

Instead of being aghast at the situation that had closed about him, Mark merely felt inert, lazily at ease. It was as though his protective armor, his ability to meet the hazards and complexities of life, had been laid aside, leaving him defenseless—and unconcerned.

"What I mean is," he said, "what's it all about? I thought——"

"You thought you'd finally gotten rid of me?"

"'I thought you were safely on your way to Circle. I never dreamt I'd ever see you again. I was thinking about you"—he waved his pipe—"and there you were. How did you get here? Where's George and Jake? Where's the dust?"

"The dust is cached," she replied. "George is heading west. Jake is bearing toward the north. I was supposed to head directly northwest, toward Circle. That would leave three trails, in case we were followed. Don't you think that was good strategy?"

"Fine. But this isn't northwest. You've been traveling away from Circle."

"Of course," she said. "That's what made it strategy. As soon as George and Jake were gone, I turned around and hurried back."

"But why?"

She looked at him intently, then turned her face away.

"Before I answer that, I want to cross-examine you. Jim——" She checked herself. "No, not Jim. You might introduce yourself, you know. I didn't catch the name, down yonder."

"Mark. Mark Brent."

"Not that it matters. Mark? It's a good name—like Jim. Rugged, sort of." She nodded, stirring the coals. "It was strange to think of you as some one else. That's what frightened me, terribly, all the way back. It was only when I saw you

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and heard your voice, and you helped me up here beside the fire, that I knew you weren't a stranger. *You* were just the same—as ever."

"True," he agreed, "I am what I am—and was, before I met you. Which is all the more reason——"

"Wait. I want to ask you a question or two, Jim—Mark. May I?"

"Of course."

"Tell me, then"—she looked at him again, smilingly—"what are all these terrible crimes you've committed?"

He shook his head. "Sorry. I can't do that."

"You must."

"Why must I?"

"Because we can speak without pretending now, you and I. Without trying to hide anything. We've gotten down to—bed rock."

A slow flush rose under his scrutiny, but her eyes did not waver. Some of his old resolution stirred within him sluggishly.

"You're right," he agreed. "We've got to call a spade a spade. Remember, you asked me."

IN swift words, as he had painted the picture to Courtenay that morning on far-off Birch Creek, he told of the forces that had sent him into the North.

She nodded, when the recital was done, her gaze fixed on the embers.

"Just as I suspected. You committed no crime—morally, I mean."

"Listen to this, then," said Mark.

Bluntly, almost brutally, he told of the Birch Creek killing. He did not spare himself, minimize or make excuse. He merely gave the facts, to the last letter of the black record.

And when he was done, she was smiling still, unimpressed.

"I don't believe it. What I mean is," she said, as he raised his hands in a helpless gesture, "if you did it, it was while you were drunk. You weren't yourself. It was terrible, of course. But you're not a drinking man. Nor a killer at heart. It's written in your face, you know. You've been unfortunate, unlucky. Circumstances have ever conspired against you and worked through you. But you're no criminal. I knew it when I first saw you. Even down yonder, when—when you told me you weren't Jim Colby, and it seemed as if you'd brought the whole world tumbling about me, I knew you weren't as bad as you were painting yourself to be." She shook her head tolerantly. "I know it now."

It warmed his heart to have her say such things, as though he sat in the glow of a fire whose heat and radiance had long been denied him.

"They'll hang me just the same," he pointed out, "if I ever show my face again along the Yukon. I won't of course."

"You're going across to the Porcupine? And then over to the Mackenzie?"

He nodded. To himself, he added: "Much farther than that."

"You know—Mark," said she, "I'm beginning to see the whole picture now. From your point of view. You had known Mr. Courtenay and Mr. Trask at Birch Creek. It must have been a terrible moment for you when they first came into the Little Muddy—that morning when we were ready to start."

"Correct." He grinned. "It was like standing in the middle of a bear trap, waiting for it to spring. I aged fast. Fortunately, Trask had played a little poker, too."

"Tell me, why did you let me believe you were Jim Colby?"

"Because I was lonely."

"Did you—enjoy my company?"

"Very much."

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HOMER TRASK

"There were many things about me, I presume, in which I didn't measure up. You were forced, on closer acquaintance, to revise your first estimate of me. What I mean is, after you had known me better, I wasn't quite as appealing to you, say, as when you first met me down in the canyon—when you were waiting by the sled?"

"You couldn't be farther from the truth," said Mark, "if you'd devoted considerable thought to it."

"Perhaps I have." Her eyes laughed upon him briefly. "You'll answer the question, if you please, sir."

"If I were to know you a thousand years," said Mark, "I'd find something new and delightful in you each day. In so far as my limited observation permits me to form an opinion"—he cleared his throat pompously—" you were, and are, perfect in each and every particular. I refer, of course, to my own narrow and individual tastes."

"Ah," she said, stirring the coals, "all this leads to an evitable conclusion." She did not meet his gaze. Her charred stick had caught fire. She waved it aloft to put it out. "How did you induce Mr. Trask and Mr. Courtenay to—to spare my life, over on the Little Muddy? How persuade those terrible and desperate men to let us come this far?"

"We were each to take a third of the gold," said Mark. "We were to have split the dust to-night."

"But what about me?"

"I was to guarantee that you would never talk. The plan was that you were to turn back with me, into the Porcupine and across the Mackenzie."

"It sounds resonable, at that." She nodded. "A good plan. Why didn't you carry it out?"

SHE looked at him then. Their gaze locked and held. In the engulfing silence that swooped down upon the canyon, it was as though the very walls waited, smiling and intent.

"Kathleen," said he sternly, "what are you trying to do to me? Don't you realize——"

"Hush," she said. "Wait."

She unwound the swaddling blanket from about her and arose. She approached him and seated herself at his side. She removed his pipe from his lips and deposited it carefully on a near-by tarpaulin. Then she raised up his arm and placed it about her shoulders.

"Now," she said, her face upturned, "what were you saying? It began: 'Don't you realize——'"

"Don't you realize," he said gently, looking down at her, "that this is harder for me than facing a dozen rifles? I'm going into the barrens alone. You're going down to Circle. You should never have come back. Can't you see that all I can say to you is: 'Happy to have met

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you, lady. See you again—perhaps.'?"

"You're so blind," she murmured, "and so selfish."

"Selfish?"

"Don't be scandalized," she reproved. "You've been thinking of yourself, from the first. At this late hour"—she turned her face away—"think of me."

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't I any gains and losses to consider? Isn't it possible that I, too, might be lonely? Don't you realize, Mark, that I haven't a friend, or relative, or any one to cling to in all the world? Where would I go, if you abandon me now?"

"Outside. To live the life you're entitled to, that you've missed here. You've got plenty of gold."

She shook her head. "Except for my schooling at the Great Bear Mission, and two years at an academy in the East, at Toronto, I've spent all my life north of the Peace River. The Outside's more terrifying to me than the North could ever be to a chechahco. I could have faced it with father. I could have faced it with you. Not alone. No"—her face still turned away, she pressed closer to him, confidingly, like a lonely child in the dark—"I can't go it alone."

"Dog-gone!" said Mark. "I'd never thought of it that way. I *have* been thinking about myself, at that. But what's the answer, Kathleen? I can't go with you. It's impossible, of course. There's nothing——"

"Hush," she said. "There *is* an answer. It's been written in the stars from the first. I'll go with you."

"*With me?* Ridiculous, child!"

"Into the Porcupine," she said. "And across the Mackenzie. I know the way. And on into the barrens. Wherever your trail leads. I'm pretty good on the trail, you know. I'm a good cook. I'll try not to be any bother."

"Don't joke," he pleaded. "You don't know what you're suggesting. Trail with *me*—a wanted man? They'll run me down sooner or later. Even in the barrens. Where would you be then? No, it's impossible."

"On the contrary, it's quite simple. Shall I outline it for you? First, we swing down to Forty Mile, on the Canadian side. There's a captain of the Mounties at the post, isn't there? He has authority to marry us."

"He also has authority," Mark pointed out, "to arrest me and hold me for the commissioner at Eagle. So we'd be licked at the start."

"But does he know you?"

Mark shook his head.

"I thought not. We take the chance. We come in at night, identify ourselves as a couple from down river, heading Outside. He marries us, and we start east immediately, toward the Porcupine."

"Wait," said Mark, "you're trying to make it sound reasonable. You know in your heart that it isn't. We might do all that. We might make it to the Porcupine, and across to the Mackenzie. True. But——"

"Listen, Mark." She was very still and small, her face turned away. "Have we—really and truly—gotten down to fundamentals? What is life? What is happiness? What are things worth while? If we have a month together—a year—two years or——"

"Don't." He withdrew his arm from about her and buried his face in his hands. "Don't, Kathleen."

"All I'm suggesting to brazenly," she whispered, "all that I can hope for us—for the future—is based on one thing only. It's the keystone, the foundation. If it isn't there, the

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argument's over. Don't you *want* me to go with you?"

He did not reply; and as moment by moment passed, it was as though the stillness of the peaks had again engulfed them. It was not a true silence, for the wolf dogs snarled throatily in the farther darkness and the ceaseless wind moaned on overhead. For Mark, head bowed, fighting his greatest fight, these things were remote.

He became aware that the girl was plucking at his sleeve. It was a timid gesture, at first, as though she hesitated to break in upon his thoughts. It suddenly became peremptory. He looked at her, and saw her pointing mutely toward the cleft.

A man was standing at the threshold of the cleft, peering in toward them under a shading hand. His dogs bulked behind him; and beyond, far down the starlit slope, other dog teams and drivers stood motionless.

"Pardon," came a stilted voice, in accents as precise as though the owner had interrupted a tête-à-tête in a moonlit garden. "Sorry to disturb you. Is it you, Brent?"

It was Courtenay's voice. In instant reaction to all that the other's presence implied, Mark snatched up his rifle and with a sweep of his arm thrust Kathleen behind him to the shelter of the sled. He knelt beside her and squinted down the sights.

"It's Brent," he replied. "Don't move, Courtenay."

CHAPTER XV.

IDENTICAL INTERESTS.

THE Englishman raised his hands above his head. He was obviously unarmed. "I'm coming in, if you don't mind, Brent. I'm alone, as you see. I have matters of importance to discuss with you."

Mark considered this in silence. The coolness of the man was incredible.

"I assure you that I mean no harm," said the Englishman. "I give you my word that I'm here in your interest. And in the lady's interest as well."

"Let him come," whispered the girl.

"Come in slowly," said Mark. "Keep your hands up. No funny moves of any description. You know me, Court."

"It's because I know you that I'm here," responded the Englishman, advancing.

He came slowly, but without hesitation, into the circle of fire. He eyed Mark questioningly, hands still upraised. The latter advanced, rifle ready.

"Turn around, Court. That's right." He explored the other's person swiftly, making sure that there were no concealed weapons. "O. K. You can sit down over yonder." He motioned across the fire, so that the Englishman would be between them and the cleft.

But Courtenay did not seat himself until Kathleen had resumed her place beside Mark. Then, settling himself comfortably, he produced his cigarette case.

"That's Trask and his savages down below?" queried Mark.

Courtenay shook his head. He raked forth an ember and lighted his cigarette.

"They're troopers from Forty Mile. In Her Majesty's service." He puffed slowly, blowing a cloud of smoke upward, and added: "Under my command."

"Mounties?" reiterated Mark. "Under *your* command?"

"Northwest Mounted Police,"

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said the other. "I am Captain Courtenay."

That he was enjoying the dramatics of the moment, was indeed plain. His eye twinkled frostily upon them.

"*You* a Mounty?" Mark was utterly at sea. "How long?"

"For about five years past."

"But you spent the last year around Circle City and Birch Creek. Constantine's in charge of the post at Forty Mile. There's never been more than ten troopers at the post. You're not one of them."

"My district," said Courtenay, "is east of the mountains. I've been here on a special mission. At my own expense. You might call it a sort of furlough. I may say that my commission depended upon it, so I stayed with it—er—perseveringly. The man I was after is behind bars at Forty Mile. He'll be tried presently and hanged—which will conclude the incident." He flicked the ashes from his cigarette and cocked an inquiring eye at Mark. "His name, in this part of the North, is Trask."

"Trask?"

"Wanted on the Mackenzie for murder," the other nodded. "Also on the Stewart. Also at Birch Creek. Unfortunately, he can only hang once. I've spent the past two weeks seeing to it that the Dominion shall have that privilege."

ORDINARILY, Mark's mental processes were as keen and alert as those of any animal of the wild. He scratched his head now, bewildered, striving to assimilate the impact on succeeding impact of the other's words.

"Let's get this straight, Court. You followed Trask over from the Mackenzie——"

"Wait," said Kathleen. She had caught a hint whose tremendous significance had escaped Mark. "Did you say that Mr. Trask was also wanted for murder—at Birch Creek?"

"I didn't express it quite correctly," Courtenay apologized. "He *will* be wanted there—when the facts are of record. But as I said before, it will be too late. The Dominion has a prior claim. You know, Mark, old boy, I'd have told you this long since, except that it would have disturbed a delicately balanced situation. If you had postponed your dash for liberty a few minutes longer, down in the canyon—until we came to where my troopers were waiting to receive Trask with open arms—I'd have told you then. To tell you now is the reason why I am here, at this ungodly hour, instead of resting from my labors." He waved his cigarette. "It was Trask, you know, who shot Corliss."

Mark stared at him fixedly. Had the other spoken in an unknown tongue, he could not have registered less comprehension.

"I wasn't as drunk as I was supposed to be that night, Mark. Neither was Trask. But *he* thought I was out completely when the shooting developed. It burst forth and was over so quickly that I couldn't prevent it. It was too late then, and I was immediately between the devil and the deep sea.

"This was the situation." There was a rare hint of apology in his bearing. "Don't feel too harshly toward me, Mark, old man. I had spent the better part of two years trailing Trask from the Mackenzie. I had failed once before in life—as I explained to you, I believe, when you were leaving Birch Creek. My commission in the service depended upon running Trask down. I was on a species of probation, because he

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had slipped through my fingers on the Mackenzie. My sole chance to make good was to take him into custody. On Canadian soil. So that he would have to face Canadian courts.

"And there I was. You were one of the few men in the North, Brent, whom I held in the highest esteem. You were, if I may presume so far, a friend. But if I told what had actually happened in your cabin that night——"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Mark hoarsely. "What *did* happen?"

"You were out," said Courtenay. "I was out—presumably. As a matter of fact, in the course of the brawl, I had gathered the final information I needed to identify Trask. I was pondering that information, apparently—ah—petrified, when there came a disturbance outside. Trask was in a more than ordinarily ugly mood. He stepped to the door, stood there for a moment, then turned and picked up your rifle. I was about to protest, thinking he was preparing to shoot the noisiest of the dogs, when he fired —twice.

"You were sitting in the corner, Brent. On the floor, with your head between your knees. You lurched to your feet and said: 'Whazzat?' Something of the sort. Trask had sobered, too. His face was—er—unpleasant to see. He looked about him. He looked at me, and the others. He thrust the rifle into your hands.

"'You've downed him, Brent!' he said, kicking the door shut. 'You've downed him.' He repeated it over and over, leading you to the table. He poured you a drink. You drank it, returned to the corner, stood your rifle against the wall and sat down again, your head between your knees. This time, you passed out completely.

"Now then, Mark, old man, see the devil of a pickle I was in! What to do? If I incriminated Trask, he'd slip through my fingers. Your American authorities would have him and hold him. At the same time, you were my friend. So——"

"Dog-gone!" Mark breathed. "I'm beginning to see it now. That's why you told me to stay close to the Yukon. That's why you followed Trask up to the Porcupine. That's why you let me think—— But wait! How did your troopers happen to be waiting below here?"

"I sent them word before I left Circle, on Trask's trail. I was quite sure I could persuade him to return to the Yukon again, by way of Broken Tent."

"Why Broken Tent?"

"You knew—or didn't you?"—that the Canadian line falls just west of Broken Tent? Did you know that you are on Canadian soil now?"

"No, I didn't know that."

"Few old-timers do. They pay little attention to where the line is. It makes no difference, ordinarily. But I was taking no chances on the arrest being illegal. I was taking no chances whatever. That's why I couldn't risk taking you into my confidence, at any stage of the game. By permitting you to believe that I was as villainous as Trask, you helped deliver him into my hands. I have made it plain, I hope, that I wanted to make it *certain* that Trask did not escape me?"

"I've gathered that." Mark grinned.

"Another few minutes would have brought us to my troopers," continued the other. "I suspected that you had some such dash in mind, but the swiftness with which you executed it caught me unawares. How-

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ever, it enabled us to take Trask without any trouble. His attention was concentrated on you. Rather—ah—savagely. His Indians dispersed, as I was sure they would, the moment handcuffs were on him. My troopers, fortunately, had taken the two scouts into custody, so that no warning could get back up the trail.

"There's one thing more. Quite important, too, I fancy. Have you wondered, Mark, old man, why it was that Corliss came to Birch Creek that night?"

Mark nodded. "He was after somebody, of course. I thought it was me. Trask apparently thought *he* was the one."

"He was after you," said Courtenay. "On that Priboloff business. You see, Mark, the indictments against the crew of the poachers had all been dismissed. It had been proved that they had been practically shanghaied into it, or something of the sort. The commissioner thought you'd like to know it as soon as possible."

"Dog-gone!" Mark breathed. For the first time, the full force of what the other had revealed began to come home to him. His groping hand found Kathleen's and held it close. "Dog-gone!" he repeated, in a shaken voice.

"And so," said Courtenay, tossing his cigarette into the fire, "the picture rounds out. It was to give myself the pleasure of telling you all this in person that I followed you here, instead of sending my troopers. That Miss McCoy was also here made it doubly pleasant. It raises the assumption that your interests are—ah—somewhat similar?"

"Similar?" Mark laughed. "Man, they're identical!"

"I suspected as much," said Courtenay. "Congratulations, you know, and all that sort of thing. I mean it, Mark—Kathleen—if I may? I speak—as a friend."

He regarded them smilingly; and it was as though, in that moment, that his thin-lipped face was aloof and inscrutable no longer; as though, an ancient mask laid aside, the soul of the man beamed forth upon them—warmly, exultantly, without envy or regret—bidding them good luck along a sunlit trail whose splendid prospects he himself could never glimpse.

Only for an instant it was so. It was Captain Courtenay, of the Mounties, who rose to his feet, stiffly formal in the dispatch of official business.

"Your gold is somewhere hereabouts, no doubt. Such an amount should be protected. I'll be happy to offer my troopers as an escort to Forty Mile."

"Thank you," said the girl, in a low voice. "And—and for many other things, Captain Courtenay."

"Court," said Mark, "much obliged."

"Quite all right," said the other, saluting. "Happy to be of service. We'll wait for you down below while you—ah—assemble your equipment."

Left alone, Mark and Kathleen did not immediately pack for the trail. They stood for a moment in a circle of radiance that seemed to have no farther limit.

"You don't have to do it now," said he. "I wouldn't have let you. But you *would* have gone with me into the barrens. I'll never forget that, Kathleen."

"Our interests," she whispered, "are identical."

And this was the second time, in their career in the North, that Mark saw tears in her eyes; but these were tears of happiness.

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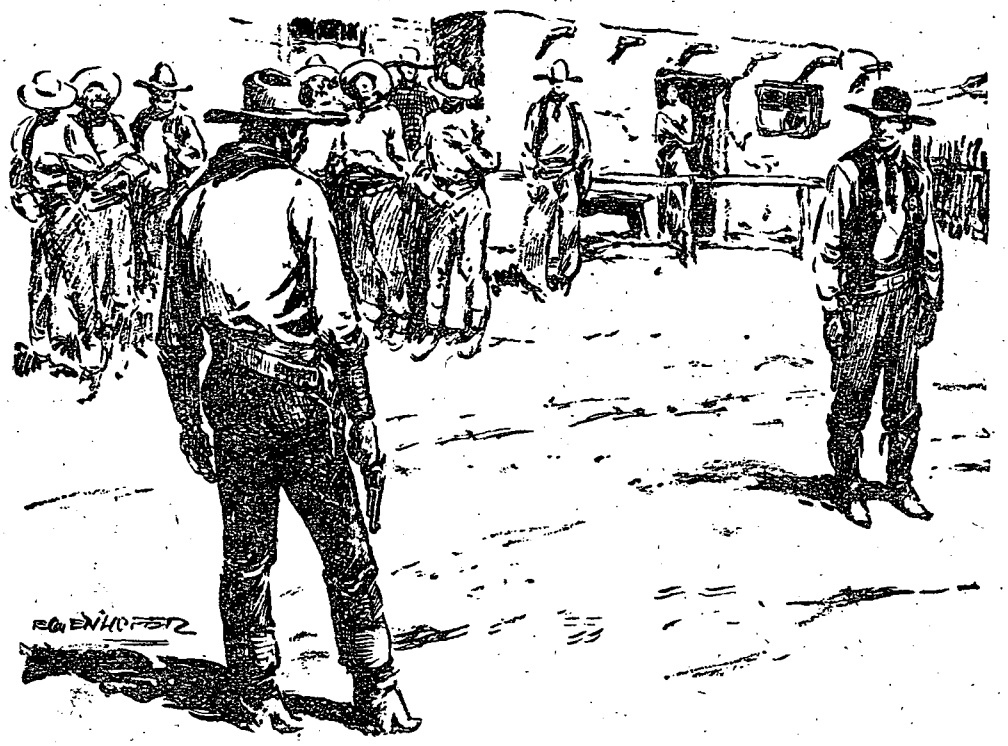

THE MARSHAL'S MAGIC

By FREDRIC H. YOUNG

Author of "Dry Gulched," etc.

WHILE yet another marshal was being lowered to the over-populated depths of Tascosa's boot hill, "Butch" Travis, sitting in front of his log shack, whetting the long blade of his jackknife on his boot, prepared to slice another notch in the butt of his heavy six-gun. His thick-skinned thumb slid downward over the tiny ridges of the bone handle, while Butch's brain, accompanied by a movement of the thick lips, tabulated the score. The slithery grin on his mouth relaxed as the count was finished. Twelve notches—twelve dead men. And this one—No. 13!

Meanwhile, in town, a few miles from the narrow gorge where Butch Travis lived, came the task of selecting a new town marshal for Tascosa. No blue-grass puncher's job was this; he who marshaled must be harder than hard, with chilled-steel callousness, and a cat-quick draw.

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Inside the Square Deal Bar, discussing the wherefore of obtaining a new marshal, stood, or leaned against the bar, some dozen or maybe fifteen of Tascosa's leading citizens. As their leading spokesman stood Dave Mulkie, mayor of the town, who, between quaffs, talked:

"There ain't a man in town fit fer to lock horns with Travis," he bemoaned.

"What we gotta do is import a hombre that hitches his paw to greased lightnin', when he starts to fetch his firearms up'ards!"

Grumblings of assent arose from the men at hand, and names were voiced here and there, but the ways of the mails were as yet embryonic in that point of the West, and the need of an immediate peace officer in Tascosa was essential to the peace of the town.

And then it was that from out of the dusk, a stranger rode into Tascosa. His gangling legs lifted from the sweat-matted sides of his mount, and the man was, of a sudden, walking along the ground. No Arabian steed was his, but rather, a Roman-nosed, flea-bitten, broomtail. The stranger shook his lanky frame of the trail dust, ran his tongue around his cotton-dry mouth, and directed his steps toward the Square Deal Bar.

"A good chance," he told himself, sweeping a trail-weary glance over the men that flanked the edge of the bar, "to bum a drink, mebbeso."

HE hooked his long elbows upon the bar's edge, and studied the group of men, now silent. Then, not being immediately confronted by a barkeep, he picked up a saltshaker from the bar, held it up in plain sight of all and—wordlessly—passed his hand to right and left before it. A clatter of low ejaculations followed its complete disappearance.

Then, as the audience, now thoroughly alert, was on the brink of exclamations, he reached over to the genial-looking puncher at his left, said "Alakazam" twice, and produced the shaker from the loose flaps of this man's vest.

The stillness following the receptacle's appearance was, for a moment, punctuated by a series of short laughs, and as many more smiles. "Hack" Spencer, the big puncher whose vest had given forth the vanished object, laughed loudly.

"Let's see you do that again, feller," he coaxed.

The lanky one gazed with mournfur desire at a mug of beer on the bar.

"I cain't never do that trick twice in a row 'thout guzzlin' a snoot o' beer," he drawled. His very words seemed to be coated with the red dust of the trail.

"Set 'em up, bartender." Spencer laughed. "I'm plumb bumfoozled about that there saltshaker."

There came, unbroken, the noise of water gushing from a fast-draining sink. Then the lanky stranger, wiping the back of a grimy hand over his mouth, again picked up the uncanny dispenser of salt. Once more it faded from view before the astonished gaze of the audience, this time to reappear, following two "Alakazams," from the big puncher's boot top.

"Ho-haw!" laughed Spencer loudly. "Yo're a plumb magishun. Where do you hail f'um, an' what did yore paw fust call you?"

The newcomer described an unending arc with his lengthy arm.

"Name o' Skinny Shane," he said. "F'um any place to here. Right now I'm lookin' fer a stake. Could

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you-all mebbeso steer me to a job o' wranglin' dogies?"

An instant's hush quelled sound over the room. Knowing and questioning nods tilted high-crowned hats, first this way, and then that way. Some nodded yes, others no. Finally Dave Mulkie spoke:

"We-all have got a job open as city marshal," he said, running his eyes the length and back again of the strange puncher. "Pays three hundred a month—while it lasts."

The tall puncher, fish-gasping for an extended second, rubbed his fingers briskly up and down his lean thighs. "You—you mean I c'u'd have that job?" he questioned in true amazement.

"Kin you yank a hawglaig right lively?" the mayor questioned.

"We-el-l," answered "Skinny" Shane, pushing his floppy Stetson back with one hand, while runnnig the other hand through his sorrel mane, "I ain't so all-fired chain lightnin' with a iron, you understand, but I got a heap o' tricks up my sleeve. Look."

Shane pulled the sombrero from his head, and stepped close to Mulkie. Waving it to right and left, before the man's rotund middle, he repeated his magic words, and pulled, from the depths of the windworn hat, a heavy watch and chain.

This bit of black magic drew forth from the mayor's lips an astonished gasp. 'Why, dog-gun ya, hombre," he spat. "Tha's my watch!"

"Shore 'tis," admitted the magician blandly. "Plucked it right outta yore vest."

"Well," said Mulkie, after some moments of deliberation. "You might kin cut an acre-wide swath makin' saltshakers and the like disappear an' change places, but, I'm warnin' you now, you would have to make yoreself disappear right suddenlike, at times, to hold down this job. Nup—I reckon, without bein' fast on the draw, you ain't the hombre, we're lookin' for."

"That's where yo're plumb wrong," argued Shane, drawing closer to the mayor. "I'll take yore job, an' guarantee that peace and quiet shall henceforth reign in your city. You know, when the hand is quicker'n the eye, you kin just bumfoozle the wool right over most folks' eyes.

"Why don't yuh let him take a stab at it, Dave?" cut in Hack Spencer, who had been quite taken by the stranger's talent. "We got a place or two left up to boot hill—an' it don't cost much to plant 'em yonder, no way."

The mayor, pursing his lips, was silent for some moments. Abruptly he broke the long pause:

"O. K., mister—whatever you said yore name was," said Mulkie. "Yo're the marshal of Tascosa; yore pay starts now. But I'm warnin' you, when Butch Travis comes to town, which'll be right soon, I figger, you best pull that Stetson o' yourn clean down to yore boot heels, an' do a right smart o' disappearin'.

"Fact is, if we kin ever land Travis in the calaboose—which ain't likely, onless you kin unchain him from them hawglaigs o' his—we kin railroad him fer more years than there is ticks on a cow critter's back."

A WEEK later, the marshal, sitting in the swivel chair in front of his littered desk, was suddenly roused as the front door of the office burst inward with a bang against the wall.

It was the mayor, Dave Mulkie, and if the color of his face, which might have been red, or purple,

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maybe, portended anything, then it was evident that the man was in the attitude of hurried excitement.

"Butch Travis just rid in!" His voice came in a blurred tremor. "He's down at the Square Deal Bar, an' he's achin' to be plumb mean!"

The marshal, receiving the news with a calm regard, puckered his lips so that they reached toward his angular nose.

"Reckon I guess I better go down an' meet the gent," he said, rising to his feet and clumping through the door past Mulkie.

As Shane entered the Square Deal, he noted that somewhat of an audience was on hand. The thought flicked through his mind—*mourners of the dead!* Then he revised it to—*mourners of those about to die!* It was an easy matter for him to single out the killer, for he stood, roaring orders to a hastily obedient barkeep, alone, at one end of the bar.

Skinny Shane, squaring his shoulders, stepped up and tapped lightly on the man's shoulder. Butch whirled with surprising quickness for a man thewed, such as he was, like a bull beef. His murderous hands swooped to gun butts as his body swung round.

"Yo're Butch Travis, I take it," said Shane mildly.

"You kin bet yore gizzard I am!" Travis growled like a dog, a half sneer forming on his lips and his gaze sweeping the marshal up and down, to rest on his vest front and the shiny star. "An' what would the new marshal be wantin' with Butch Travis?"

"Warrant fer yore arrest," replied the officer, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Warrant? Haw-haw!" guffawed the killer, and then his voice hardened to a raspy growl. "Get this—marshal of Tascosa, er any other place, fer that matter—you better start fannin' fer yore hardware, ef you want me. Savvy?" As he spoke, the outlaw crab-walked backward along the bar, away from the marshal, until he stood, eyes gimleting, some ten feet distant from Shane.

"Ain't got no gun with me," said Shane; it might have been an apology. "Yo're too all-fired fast with a iron fer me to fool with. I just thought you-all had better obey the law, an' come with me to the jail."

"Ho-ho! A marshal without the nerve to lug a hawglaig! Now ain't that the purty little boy fer you?"

"Oh," replied Shane, "I got the nerve to carry one—shore nuf, I have, but it wouldn't be of any use, fer you could beat me to the draw by the width of a burro. But that ain't the point, it's this: You said I didn't have nerve—well, how about hangin' yore bonnet on this un? Take yore two guns, an' shuck 'em of all the ca'tridges but one, an' we'll fill 'em up with blanks—I got some over to the office. Then we'll put the guns under a hat, an' flip to see who gets first pick. We'll stand at fifteen paces, and fire, one at a time, turn about, an' see who is the lucky hombre! How about it—have *you* got the nerve?"

"The killer's response was without pause:

"Shore! An' the one that gets first draw, gets to fire first. Go get yore blanks; this'll be a picnic fer ol' Butch Travis!"

SHANE, entering his office, turned at the sound of rapid footsteps, and saw three men approaching at a half run—Dave Mulkie, "Siwash" Blitz, and Hack Spencer.

"You can't do it, Skinny!" puffed

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Mulkie, upon entering the office. "You spoke a man's piece, but the sacrifice is too great; Tascosa ain't worth it! I'm responsible fer givin' you the job, but I ain't goin' to have yore blood on my hands. No, sir! Yore hoss is at the rack outside—fork him, an' fan the brush! Here, I'll give you a month's pay to leave. But git, afore that hombre strolls outside an' sees you pullin' out!"

Skinny's wide grin was expressive of nonchalance.

"Shucksin's," he said. "I'm always a lucky jigger, nohow. Like as not I'll get the gun that's got the one good cartridge, an' I'll just prod him right over to the calaboose, an' we'll have him, dead to rights."

"No, you don't, Skinny!" admonished Hack Spencer. "You wrap them laigs o' yourn around that cayuse, an' burn the dust fer other parts. We-all like you too much to be luggin' you feet-first up to boot hill!"

But Skinny Shane, attuned to an unmusical fervor, was humming his way to the Square Deal Bar.

Word of the impending duel must have flown to the four corners of town swiftly, for milling in the dust in front of the saloon was an aggregation of half a hundred of Tascosa's citizens.

In the center of the crowd there was a clearing, and here the lanky marshal wormed his way, to face Butch Travis.

"Waal," said the peace officer, glancing at the killer and then to the crowd, and back, "here's the blanks. Shuck the ca'tridges outta them irons o' yourn, 'ceptin' one, an' I'll fill 'em up with these. Oh, you needn't be afeard." Shane raised his voice to the crowd: "I'm givin' orders now that Mr. Travis ain't to be molested during this duel. An' if he wins, nobody's to touch him till he gets his irons loaded again."

The killer breathed easier following this speech.

Came a moment of tensed silence, as, softly humming, the marshal deftly tucked blank after blank into the chambers of the Colts. With the second gun—that one with the real bullet—Shane seemed slower; but then, perhaps, and maybe not, he was testing the weight of the gun; for there was that chance that he would win the flip of the coin, and get first choice.

But Lady Luck smiled with reverse English upon Tascosa's marshal, or so it seemed, for, grinning like a catamount, Travis, with his hand groping around under a broad-brimmed Stetson, was fondling the two pistols. The choice was his.

He smiled inwardly—with the reverse of mirth—for both his guns bore different marks on the butts, easily distinguishable by the killer, and the fool marshal—erring—had let him watch the loading.

Now the crowd of onlookers had separated, lining a wide lane in the street for the two duelists. Standing at fifteen paces, the two men waited for the starter's signal.

"Go!"

Travis, a devilish slit to his greenish eyes, swung upward his six-gun. His finger curled inward on the hair-trigger. The gun roared and spat a pale-blue flame, but the marshal merely grinned weakly—it was one of the blanks.

"Yore turn." Butch grinned.

The marshal's hand swooped up. Another explosion, and, as yet no blood drawn by either contestant. The third, fourth, and fifth explosion shattered the deathly silence. The strain was telling on the crowd, for after every report of the pistols, a dense muttering arose.

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Travis raised his gun to fire his fifth shot. The harsh breathing of men played on the echo of the report—for the marshal still stood, and, for that matter, so did the killer. Travis grinned, and steeled his eye. The next one——

And then it was again his turn. The killer's eyes narrowed to mere slits, his teeth were clamped tightly, but the wrist that swung his Colt to aim at the heart of the marshal was as lithe and active as the leap of a panther. He poised, feet widespread, for that last shot. He took deadly bead, then, with a convulsive jerk, the gun roared.

But at that second, or the one following, the killer's face took on an unhealthy pallor of deathlike gray. His big hand relaxed like an eagle's talon, and the gun clattered in the dust at his feet. For there, upright and to all appearances in good health, stood the lanky marshal of Tascosa—grinning.

"Seems to be my shot, Butch," drawled Shane, his voice uncannily clear in the profound silence, punctuated only at brief intervals by a sharp rasp of breath from the crowd. "I'm goin' to give you one chance, though," Shane continued, his voice now assuming a steely hardness, "of goin' to jail, or takin' this last shot o' mine. It's yore choice, which do you prefer?"

Travis's voice was that of a man beaten:

"I'll go—I'll go to jail, I reckon," he croaked. "You done got the drop on me, dead wood."

AS the heavy steel door clanked behind the one-time bad man, Skinny Shane, marshal of Tascosa, stepped to the outside of the calaboose, raised skyward the pistol that had prodded Travis to jail, and yanked on the trigger. After the explosion had died down, he turned back to the jail and met face to face with Dave Mulkie. This man commended him highly for his steely nerve.

"Son, yo're shore nuf plumb stuffed with fortitude! Why, not for a thousand dollars—ner ten times that much—would I a-did what you did. But say, what was you firin' that bullet in the air fer? It's liable to come right down an' hurt some one."

Shane glanced quickly about, and then grasped hold of the mayor's vest front, leading him out of hearing of eavesdroppers.

"You needn't spread this further'n yorese'f," he whispered, "but there weren't neither of them guns loaded with a good slug. I fingered that one outta the chamber, an' substitooted a blank—an' I fired that one now, so nobody'd ever know. The hand," resumed the marshal, with a flick of his eye, "has got to be plumb quicker'n the eye, to even make a good trick a success."

GASOLINE FROM SEALS

ALTHOUGH the seal herds are protected by international agreement, it is permissable to kill a certain number each season. Heretofore, the carcasses have been made little use of after the removal of the skin, but they are now being utilized as a source of gasoline and other valuable by-products. The bodies are rich with oil, and more than half of it is made into gasoline—the remainder into other useful materials.

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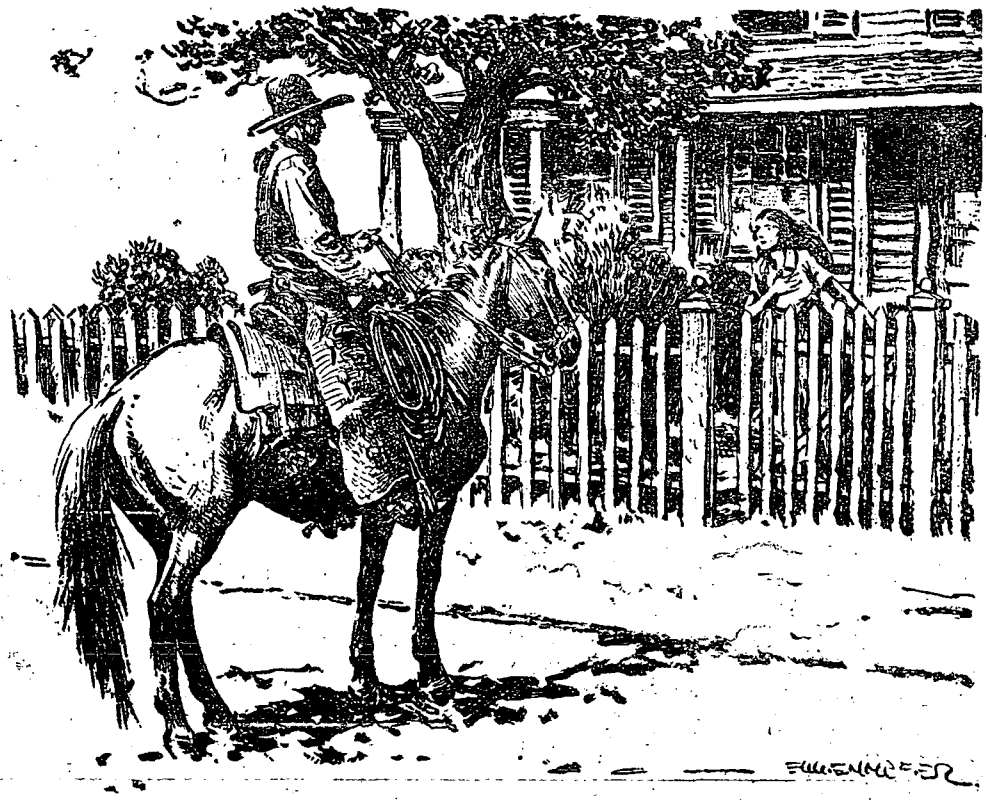

SHORT CUT TO WIGWAM

By GUTHRIE BROWN

Author of "Stage-line Six," etc.

THE broad, square, heavy-jowled man at the desk jerked forward in his chair. "You want to marry my *daughter!*" He gave the last word great emphasis. "Well, you certainly have a nerve!"

The slim young man with the dare-devil eyes did not appear to have been blasted out of the room. Del Norman was not an easy person to blast. He rested his weight easily on one leather-clad leg and remarked pacifically:

"Of course we knew that you'd more'n likely hit the ceiling, but——"

"'We'!" roared Lou Manning, gripping the chair arms. "Do you mean to tell me that you have—have——"

He seemed unable to go on, and Del inquired:

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"Did you suppose I'd speak to you before I did the girl?"

"This is what comes," growled Manning, "of her mother being away for six months. I'll have a talk with Lois."

"Do," encouraged his visitor.

Manning looked at him from under heavy brows. It might, it just might be wise to go a little easy. Lou Manning had known his daughter for twenty-one years.

"Now, see here, Norman, what've you got to offer a girl? You're just a common range rider, with a little ranch up in the hills here back of Calcite. You're mortgaged to the eyes. You haven't a nickel but what you make freighting for the general store. Maybe you have got a small start in cattle, but what's that?"

"Lois says it's good enough."

"Lois!" snorted that young lady's father, and dismissed her from the question. "My boy, we may as well face facts. This country is never going to amount to anything. Oh, I know that all my mining interests are here. But the properties are making no more than expenses. I'm going to sell out to the first sucker I can catch. We're four days by wagon road from the county seat at Heffner. That haul puts us on the blink forever."

Del broke in: "But, Mr. Manning, when we get our road over Wigwam, we'll be only one-day's drive from Heffner, and——"

Manning burst into a loud guffaw. "A road over Wigwam! Over that mile-high pile of granite? Hasn't this country talked about a road over Wigwam for twenty years? And where's all the talk got anybody? The county seat doesn't give a tinker's dam about the folks down here. There never will be——"

Del interrupted, doing his young best to be patient. "Yes, but the county commissioners are really considering it now. They've been making surveys."

"Young man"—the mine owner got out of his chair and pointed a broad forefinger—"there'll never be a road over Wigwam. Any day I see a wagon and four horses come into Calcite from over Wigwam, you can marry Lois. Now, go chase your cows and forget about all this nonsense."

Del Norman turned on a spurred heel and went out. He flung himself on a horse before the door and rode up Calcite's one street, toward the little canyon town's best house. A girl ran down to the gate to meet him, dark hair flying, bright eyes laughing into those of the young rancher.

"Honey, what did the dear old bear say?" she demanded.

Del told her, holding her hand. "And now, Lois, I'm going right after Dutch Loder, who's boss on the board of county commissioners. We're going to have that road by fall, and then——"

Both lost themselves for a little while in the thought of the "then."

"YOU young bucks," grunted "Dutch" Loder—unbuttoning an eighteen-inch collar and wiping the perspiration from a glistening pate—"you cubs allus get in such a thunderin' rush about things. I'll admit that this end o' the county needs the road, but it ain't feasible to build it now, Del. You see, taxes are pretty high, and it's goin' to be an almighty expensive undertakin', because so much of it has gotta be built through solid rock."

"Well," Del argued reasonably, "you know the report the surveyors made. They say there are only a

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few places that are absolutely impassable for a wagon now. And there are miles that have a natural, easy grade. The worst is the Devil's Washboard, on the south slope of Wigwam, and one of the surveyors told me that he was sure surprised to find that he could walk across those rock crinkles so easy. It looks steeper than it really is. You see, Mr. Loder, if we'd all get together on this, the county seat and the folks here, we would put that road through easy as shootin' fish."

"Yeah," drawled Loder, "you try gettin' folks to pull together, young feller. You just try it a while. There ain't nothin' quite so educatin' in this life as to try to get people to coöperate."

"But you'll talk to the other commissioners, and do all you can?"

"Boy," Loder told him, "you better forget this for a coupla years. If I was to advocate that road real serious, my job wouldn't be worth that!" The corpulent commissioner snapped his fingers. "Folks are thinkin' and talkin' hard times, and they throw a fit at the mere mention o' raisin' taxes."

"But the regular road appropriation for this end of the county——" Del began.

"Wouldn't be a drop in the bucket," Loder stated. "You go along and fatten your steers, boy, and quit buttin' your head agin' a stone wall."

It was a set back, but Del was not disheartened. He'd had a card up his sleeve. He went to Chris Lampman, the biggest rancher in the south end of the county, a man for whom he had worked several years before.

Lampman sat on his horse, chewing his gray mustache while he listened to Del's eloquent plea. Then he unwound one long leg from the saddle horn and produced a black plug of "chewin'." He bit into this gravely and frugally.

"Kid," he inquired with kindness, "can't you read the writin' on the wall? If we was to get a road over Wigwam, this whole blamed country would be settled up in a few years. Then where'd us cattlemen be? Where'd the range go to? We'd have homesteaders around here thicker'n ticks on a sheep. Why, we're hardly makin' ends meet now. That four-day haul outta Heffner is all that keeps us from bein' shoved plumb off the map, by squatters and such."

Del dropped the reins on the neck of his horse and rolled a smoke.

"You're the one that can't read the writin', Chris. Times are changin'. If we go on makin' it hard for settlers to come in, we're just spitin' ourselves. They'll come in in the long run, anyhow. And what are we scared of? If every possible homestead was to be taken up in the hills, there'd still be plenty of range for everybody. Only difference would be that we'd take care of our range, and portion it out fair. Not graze it down to the grass roots, and then try to shove each other outta what's left.

"Look at all the mining property above us here. Every prospect hole would be developed, if the owners could get a short haul to the railroad. And the mines would offer a big home market to stockmen. Besides, how many pounds of beef would we save every fall, by cuttin' three, four days off the drive to Heffner?"

Lampman shook his head. "You make it sound nice, but I know too blame well that settlers ain't good for a cattle country. You stick to your whitefaces, kid, and let these here fool civilized idees alone."

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DEL managed to keep a serene countenance until he had ridden out of sight of the older man. He had believed Lampman his best bet. But the rancher had turned him down as hard as Loder, in fact harder, for he would admit no good in the scheme whatever.

It was with a heavy heart that the young man went to meet Lois that night. But the girl had worse news.

"Del, daddy told me to-day that I was to go East for a year."

Del straightened, eyes flashing.

"He can't put that over! How much does he think we'll stand for, anyway?"

"Wait a minute, dear. He says I'm too young to marry yet—and he was a year younger than me when he got married! But he says that's different. Please wait till I tell you! I told him that I was of age, and I asked him if he was going to force me to run away. Del, I wish you could have seen his face! He turned as white as if I had struck him. He's so s-silly about me!"

"He's not the only one," Del said gravely, slipping an arm about her and pulling her close.

"And I told him then," Lois went on, "that if he felt so strongly about it, maybe we could wait—— Don't look that way, Del! You know that I'll love you always!"

"Do I?"

Lois was ready to cry. "Please come back here! Do you doubt me?"

The cowboy answered slowly: "That isn't it. But I know, I know clear down inside of me, that it wouldn't be right to put it off so far. Why, anything could happen! You might be in a railroad wreck, or get sick and die."

Lois had to laugh. "You're every bit as silly as my foolish father. Nothing can——"

Del suddenly whirled toward her. He seized her and drew her to him again with a quick laugh.

"I've got it, Lois! I've got it now. You know James Farner, that banker who lives over at the county seat? He owns more mining property around here than any man in the county. And he's the heaviest stockholder in the High Park Cattle Company. Nobody'd get half as much good out of a road over Wigwam as he would.

"I'll start out to see him tomorrow, and I bet he'll help. If I can win him, he'll sure make those commissioners come to heel. I'll take my light team and a spring wagon, and make a quick sashay of it. I can bring back about a thousand pounds of groceries for the store, pay for the trip. If we didn't need the money so darn bad, I'd go on horseback and save time."

Lois was as excited as Del himself. She loved that "we."

"And when will you be back?" she wanted to know.

"Let's see. Well, I can make it back by Monday easily."

"Five whole days!" wailed Lois.

"Who's silly now?" teased Del. "And you were talking about leaving me for a solid year!"

"But I might have to, Del. Daddy says that I must start for Heffner a week from Saturday. If something doesn't happen before then——"

"Something will surely happen," promised Del, his jaw hard.

MR. FARNER," said the prim-looking, lean and extremely bald gentleman who guarded the banker's outer office, "there's a young man here says he must see you. He hasn't an

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appointment, and he won't give his name, and he won't go away. He looks like a very common, ordinary cow-puncher to me. What shall I do about it?"

"Let him wear out the seat of his pants on that bench," growled Mr. James Farner, and bent his hawklike countenance anew over the papers on his desk.

Del sat on the bench in the outer office through the forenoon and most of the afternoon. He did not know that Farner went out to lunch through a side door and smiled sardonically at the patient figure. The bank closed at four o'clock, and Del was forced to adjourn to the street. He sat on the curb and thought things over.

The next morning he reappeared at eleven o'clock and asked the prim gentleman, "Is Mr. Farner in?"

"He is busy," was the frigid reply.

The next instant the guardian's jaw dropped in horror. The young man had vaulted the railing that separated him from the banker's door. He strode to the door and knocked.

Somebody barked, "Come in!"

Del stepped quickly inside and jerked the door shut in front of a stricken face. He held the knob firmly.

Farner glared from his chair. "Well, I'll be—— Get out of here, young man, before you're thrown out!"

"Mr. Farner," said Del, holding the knob against frantic efforts to open the door, "I have something to say that is mighty important to you personally."

Farner half rose from his chair, and then sank back. He had not attained his present position in the world by overlooking many bets.

"Say it then!"

Del let go the knob, and the outer guardian plunged through, puffing and red of face. Farner gruffly waved him outside again.

Del, hat respectfully in hand but entirely at ease, presented his case with all the persuasion he knew. He didn't know how young and colorful and alive he looked against the dark walls of the severe room. Farner watched him keenly, listening without comment.

When the speaker had finished, the banker snapped, "Sit down!"

Del sat down, his heart pounding with hope. Farner scowled into space for time, tilted back in his chair. Then he began abruptly.

"Young man, there's no future for that end of the county. I grant that if they had a good road out, the mines would develop and the whole region come alive. But I wrote off as a loss, a long time ago, my holdings in that territory. The expense of building a usable road over Wigwam puts it out of the question."

"But the surveyors said——"

"Don't 'but' me!" snorted Farner. "I know what I'm talking about. I once had the same bright dream as you. But I took a saddle horse and a pack mule across there, and I was completely cured. It would take two hundred thousand dollars to make the route passable for an empty wagon, to say nothing of a road that could be used to haul paying loads of freight and ore."

Del sat in silence, his heart getting heavier every minute. He knew that here was a man he could not influence.

"But"—Farner leaned suddenly toward him across the desk—"I have another proposition for you. How'd you like to work for me?"

"How would——" Del repeated blankly.

"I like the cut of you," the banker said frankly. "You were patient

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about seeing me, for just about as long as you should be. You took things into your own hands when you'd had enough, and your first words made me listen. I can use you, to the profit of both of us."

Del, his first flash of astonishment past, grinned at the older man.

"Your observation didn't carry you far enough, Mr. Farner. I am not a man who can be 'used,' any more than you are. I'm a cowboy trying to get his start in ranching. We're a kinda independent breed, if you've ever noticed. As a general rule we don't get rich, but we get a whale of a lot outta living. I won't take up any more of your time." Del rose.

A hard little smile tugged at the corners of the banker's mouth. He stood up and held out his hand.

"When you find out that you're licked, about this road business, come and see me again. The offer will be open."

Del's eyes were grimly steady. "And if I'm not licked?"

"Then," said Farner, "I'll back you to the last ditch. And that," he added, "is the safest bet I ever made in my life."

Del walked out into the street. He had fired his last shot, and missed. He was beaten. Yes, the banker's bet was a safe one, even if he did have completely punk ideas about the costs of road construction.

When the young man drove out of Heffner that afternoon, his head was unconsciously sunk between his shoulders, and he let the team take its course without guidance. Del had never been whipped before.

MONDAY, all day long, Lois Manning watched the road for her lover. When he did not come, she was only a little uneasy. Maybe Mr. Farner had not been in town, and Del had had to wait for him. Lois felt perfectly certain of Del's success this time. But when he did not appear the next day, she grew alarmed. By Wednesday night she was frantic.

"I know something awful has happened!" she told her father. "Del always keeps his word. Unless something terrible has happened to him, he would be here."

Manning advised her not to be foolish, and cursed himself under his breath that he had not sent her away months ago. He didn't know this deep-eyed, white-faced young woman, who fought so desperately for self-control. He could not believe that this was the same little girl who had been his devoted chum for years.

"I want to go to Heffner, now!" Lois told her father. "I want to find out what has happened. I know there's something!"

"See here, Lois. I can't possibly get away till Saturday. Del will turn up before then. You'll see him before you leave."

The girl spun upon him. "I'm not going East! I'm not going one step away from here! You can't make me."

Lou Manning said soberly: "I thought your promises were worth something. You told me that you would go, if Del didn't succeed with Farner. You were so sure he would succeed, that you thought you were safe in promising. Aren't you a good gambler. Are you going to welch on your debts?"

She turned away from him, then came back to fling herself sobbing into his arms. Her loyalties were deep, and she could not let her father down, any more than she could her lover.

Thursday morning, Case Roley came to town to find out why Del

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had not come home. Case worked for Del on his ranch in the hills above Calcite.

"I'll stay over to-morrow," the cowboy told Lois, "and if he doesn't show up, I'll start out and find him myself."

By sundown Friday, the entire town was beginning to feel concern. Thompson, the storekeeper, voiced a general conviction:

"That boy's met up with foul play somewheres, and I'll bet my hat on it."

"Well," Case Roley decided, "I'm dustin' outta here to-night, instead o' to-morrow. I can make Shell Creek——"

The voice of the puncher ceased abruptly. His hearers turned to look at him. He was staring across to the north side of town, toward a gulch that opened into the flat on which Calcite was built. The group of people near by turned to follow his gaze.

From the gulch mouth, a curious spectacle was emerging in the evening light. It was a team of horses —no, it was two teams. Yes, two teams, hitched to a spring wagon. Not all of a spring wagon. The seat was gone, and one wheel was conspicuous by its absence. In place of the wheel, a twelve-foot pole of aspen supported the axle, and gouged a deep groove in the ground as the wagon moved.

On a box which served for a seat, sat Del Norman, maneuvering his four horses down the narrow trail that led out of the gulch. The horses leaned against each other and clawed for footing on the narrow track, which had been worn to accommodate a single cow.

Del gave the assembling audience a wide grin from under a wreck of a hat. He pulled up before the office of Lou Manning, with half the town in attendance. He stood up in the wagon, an incredibly torn-and-tattered figure, and requested:

"Stand back a little, will you, boys? You got these broncs worried."

The lead team was regarding the spectators with wall-eyed terror, and trying earnestly to get between the wheelers.

Manning opened the door of his office. He stared at the tangling horses, then looked at the driver.

Del told him: "Here's four horses and a wagon that came over Wigwam. You said that whenever that happened, Lois and I could get married."

Manning gasped, gulped, and finally got out, "You mean to tell me that—that——"

"Everybody," Del said, "claims it'll take a fortune to build that road. Five thousand will open it. Stand back, honey. No telling what these brutes might do."

Lois, disheveled with her wild run from home, gave him a wan smile. Del couldn't stand that. He leaped down, reins in hand, and drew her to him before them all.

Case Roley caught the bridle bit of a lead horse and began to talk in soothing tones.

"But, Del," the cowboy asked, "where'n Sam Hill did you ever make the raise o' this team o' scrawny broomtails?"

"Well, you see," Del explained, "I was halfway home before I got my notion, then I had to hurry like the deuce to get here by to-night. I bought that old harness and lead bars off a settler on the north side of Wigwam. He didn't have any horses to spare, so I had to catch me a coupla wild ones and break 'em."

There was an amazed and appreciative silence at this statement, and some one ejaculated:

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"Well, talk about your wampas cats!"

Del disclaimed quickly: "That part of it wasn't much of a chore. But makin' it through with these groceries of Thompson's, that about got me down."

The storekeeper had been inspecting the torn-and-dirty canvas tied firmly over the load in the wagon box.

"I'd guess," he remarked judicially, "from the look of that tarp, that the groceries wasn't always on top."

Del grinned acknowledgment. "I lost seven cans o' beans on the Washboard, but everything else is there."

Manning turned on him. "Are you telling us that you came across the Devil's Washboard, with that wagon?"

Del responded, "No other way to come. Of course," he confessed, "sometimes the teams were pullin' the wagon, and sometimes it was pullin' them. There was a place or so where it was a toss-up which was ahead most o' the time. Just the same, boys, that's goin' to make a good road."

Manning looked at him, and a smile struggled to the face of the older man.

"I think I'll have a talk with Loder myself. The office is—er—empty, if you two care about stepping inside."

Del laughed and swept Lois before him. He said over his shoulder before he closed the door:

"Then you can go and have a talk with Mr. James Farner, of Heffner. But on the other hand, maybe I'll tend to that myself."

UNCLE SAM'S EVERGREEN NURSERY

ONE of the largest growers and shippers of evergreen seedlings in the country is Uncle Sam himself. The government nursery is located in the Pike National Forest, near Monument, Colorado. In the sixteen acres devoted to the project between six and seven million young evergreens are under cultivation. The annual output is one million trees, shipped to practically every State in the Union. The greater number of these trees are used in Colorado. Utah, Arizona, Wyoming, Texas, and Idaho are, however, large users of evergreens. Recently large shipments were made to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and to Portland, Oregon.

The primary purpose of the government's nursery is for reforestation projects. Thousands of young evergreens are being shipped daily to the various national forests for replanting in burned-out areas.

W. H. Schrader, superintendent, has worked for the government at the Monument nursery since it was started in 1907. Scientific rotation of crop is practiced, thus insuring first-class trees.

All the beds in the nursery are made in one size, six by thirty-six feet. Each bed contains five thousand, two hundred and fifty-six trees. The average tree when shipped out is about nine inches high, and the loss of stock is said to be only two per cent.

At present the nursery is experimenting with a shrub willow to be used in preventing bank erosion. Six thousand of these are being cultivated. The evergreens being raised for reforestation are the *ponderosa* pine, bristle-cone pine, piñon pine, Douglas fir, blue spruce, Engelmann spruce, silver cedar, and lodgepole pine.

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IDAHO'S DI-PLOMACY

By HUGH F. GRINSTEAD

Author of "Idaho's Independence Day," etc.

I WONDER how come old Ranse Morton and Pete Renfro to fall out like they did," mused "Idaho" Freeman as he sat before the fire on a chilly evening in early spring.

"I don't reckon anybody knows. Prob'ly they couldn't tell thierselves, it's been so long," replied Mack Barnes, Idaho's old partner.

"Ten years or more, ain't it, since they split up and quit speakin'?" questioned Idaho.

"Thirteen years this comin' May if I ain't mistook. They was pardners then, freightin' ore out from the Black Pigeon Mine, and before that they prospected together peaceably for ten year. When they slit up, Ranse took to herdin' sheep over tother side the Half Moon range, and Pete began drivin' the Ore Creek stage."

"Looks like their friends would've tried to git 'em together," said Idaho.

"That's the last thing anybody wanted to do. Bein' as Ranse and Pete had quit speakin' when they met, they just took it out in shootin' at each other. When Ranse got Pete in the laig, they wasn't no rest for

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Pete till he'd returned the compliment by plantin' a bullet in Ranse's shoulder. After that, they just didn't seem to meet no more, and in time both of 'em quit packin' a gun reg'lar."

"Hatin' each other like that, seems like the nat'ral thing to do would be for one of 'em to leave the country," Idaho observed after a brief pause.

"It was the last thing arry one of 'em would've thought of doin'. It would look too much like backin' down, and they ain't a drop of cowardly blood in arry one of them fellers. No, sir, each one helt his ground. When Ranse got enough money together, he bought a few cattle. Pete, out of spite, went to runnin' sheep close as he could get to Ranse's range. Ranse finally changed to sheep in self-defense, and the odds was even in a fight that's lasted till now."

"I don't never want to meet a nicer feller than Ranse Morton around home. Seems like he can't do enough for a feller," said Idaho.

"He ain't got nothin' on Pete, far as bein' friendly goes," Mack replied. "I reckon all the meanness in both them fellers has been burnt up a-hatin' each other, leavin' nothin' but kindness and friendship for all the rest of the world."

"I allow they'd be mighty friendly with each other, once they took a notion to git together in the proper sperit," said Idaho.

"Sworn enemies like them ain't agoin' to git together noway only with tooth and claw, as you might say," Mack declared.

"Now if one of 'em had a daughter and the other a son about the same age, and these two should fall in love with each other, why, I bet that would fetch 'em together."

"Gittin' fool idees outn them dime novels you been readin'," Mack sniffed. "Well, it wouldn't work, because Ranse never did marry and Pete has got a boy that's been brought up to hate Ranse like his dad does."

"Go about it right, and I bet Pete and Ranse could be brought together in a friendly way," Idaho insisted.

"Maybe you'd like to try it yourself."

"That's just what I been thinkin' about doin'. A feller with time on his hands like me had ought to do somethin' for his feller man."

"Idaho, have you plumb lost your senses? They ain't nothin' but trouble ever comes of takin' a hand in other people's quarrels."

"This is diff'rent from most. Pete and Ranse is mighty reasonable men," Idaho responded.

"Yeah, reasonable about everything but each other. They won't meet long as they can help it, but when they do, the fur is bound to fly, one way or another."

"I bet they're both itchin' to make up and shake hands," Idaho contended. "All they need's a start."

"If Ranse Morton and Pete Renfro had wanted to make up and be friends, they've had about thirteen years to do it in. If you're bent on stirrin' up a hornets' nest, just mention such a thing to either one of 'em."

"I don't aim to git 'em riled. I'll use di-plomacy."

"Idaho, you ought to know that you can't git arry one of them fellers to take anything but straight whisky."

"Aw, Mack, di-plomacy ain't a drink. It's just a roundabout way of sayin' things polite. Why, you could call a man a liar without startin' a fight, if you used the right kind of di-plomacy."

"I ain't got no faith in such new-

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fangled notions, and I'm warnin' you once and for all agin' tryin' 'em on Ranse Morton or Pete Renfro."

"I allow you'll be surprised at the way things turn out," said Idaho.

"Ain't no doubt of that, but when do you aim to start out tryin' to make the lion and the tiger lay down together?"

"Right away in the mornin' I'll ride over to Ranse's, and go from there to Pete's. I'll have to talk all the way around so's to come to the p'int easylike, but if I have good luck, them two fellers will be crackin' jokes together before to-morrow night. They'll have the hatchet buried clear out of sight."

"Look out they don't bury it in you," Mack growled.

IDAHO grinned and let the matter drop. He was too full of enthusiasm over this latest scheme of his to wish to continue the argument.

He did ride over to Ranse Morton's ranch the following morning, and it was sundown when he returned.

The dejected droop of his shoulders, and a general air of discouragement, told better than words that his mission had proved a failure. He was reticent through supper, and volunteered nothing until Mack asked a question.

"How did your di-plomacy work?" Mack inquired with a twinkle as he tamped tobacco in his pipe.

"I didn't try it," Idaho answered.

"Didn't try it?"

"No, I didn't. In the first place, I didn't git a chance to stick a word in edgeways; and in the second place, them two low-down, sheep-stealin' outlaws ain't worth wastin' breath on. I'd just like to see them——"

"Idaho, what's come over you? Why, they ain't no better men in the State than Ranse Morton and Pete Renfro. Anybody will tell you that."

"They can keep on a-tellin' it, but that won't keep me from thinkin' them two fellers are a pair of cutthroats, swindlers, and common sheep thieves," Idaho retorted.

"How did you come to git such a fool idee in your head?"

"They told me so thierselves."

"Told you?"

"Yeah. The minute I mentions Pete's name, Ranse begins talkin', and he don't let up for nigh a hour. About all he does is 'numerate the low-down tricks Pete has been guilty of, givin' name and date down to the hour and minute. Yes, sir, he laid enough crimes at Pete's door to hang him to the highest limb ever growed."

"But Pete, what does he say?" Mack prompted.

"He says the same things about Ranse, only a heap more of it. He don't only specify a lot o' high crimes and misdemeanors, but he hints at some dark secret that ain't never come out yet—murder maybe."

"Them two fellers wouldn't do the things they accuse each other of. It's just because they been at outs so long that they git to imaginin' things," said Mack.

"You said yourself that they was both truthful men, and them tales they told sounded mighty convincin' to me," Idaho responded. "What I know is that they're either dirty liars or sneakin' cowards."

"Cowards?"

"Yes. Any man that'll let another mistreat him the way them fellers has been complainin', without takin' it up, ain't nothin' but a danged coward."

"Yes, but——"

"Ain't no buts about it. The talk

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them fellers used about each other was fightin' talk, and they ain't had a fight in ten year."

"Maybe so, but long as fightin' talk don't come to a feller's ears, you can't call him a coward because he don't take it up."

"I still claim them fellers is both yaller clear to the bone," Idaho insisted.

"You danged old banty rooster, you're just sayin' a lot o' things you can't prove," Mack growled.

"N-no, I reckon I couldn't prove it, but——" Idaho trailed off, and was silent for a time.

"I be dog-goned!" he presently exclaimed, jumping to his feet excitedly.

"What's the matter; hornet sting you?" Mack queried.

"I just got a idee."

"Look out it don't bust your head," Mack growled.

IDAHO made no reply, just smiled indulgently, and presently went to bed. He didn't fall asleep at once, but lay for a long time, turning over in his mind the idea that had so suddenly come into his mind. At times he chuckled under his breath, and again he became serious and uncertain.

The next morning right after breakfast, he saddled his horse without announcing his intentions. When he mounted and started to ride away, Mack could no longer restrain his curiosity.

"Goin' to try another dose of diplomacy on Ranse and Pete?" he asked.

"No, I ain't. I'm plumb disgusted with 'em. What I'd like to see is them two fellers——"

"Well, what is it?" Mack asked when his partner stopped.

"I reckon I won't tell you what I aim to do. You'd be agin' it."

"I'm agin' it anyway. Whatever 'tis you're up to, I'm warnin' you not to do it."

Idaho grinned, reined his horse into the trail, and rode away in the direction he had taken the morning before, leaving his old partner to look after him with perplexity and concern. Mack's warning did not disturb Idaho this time. Hadn't he given the matter in hand at least an hour's thought, more or less serious?

Five or six miles from home and near the head of Shoestring Canyon, Idaho reined up at Ranse Morton's gate. He found the ranchman nailing on some loose fence wire, and wasted little time in getting around to the subject in his mind.

"Ranse, I come to tell you somethin' I figgered you'd ought to know, bein' a friend of yourn like I am," he began. "That sheep-stealin' varmint is tellin' round that you pizened his water hole and set fire to his haystacks."

"Who says I done them things?" demanded the ranchman, bristling.

"That ornery Pete Renfro," Idaho answered.

"Why, that—that——"

"On top o' that, he says you're a white-livered coward. He claims he'd 'a' licked you before now, only you run every time you see him comin'."

"Me run from that skunk?" Ranse Morton thundered, lips and hands trembling with hate, fear, or some undefined emotion. "Why, if they was any runnin' away, he done it. I'd killed him that time I shot him in the laig if somethin' hadn't sp'iled my aim."

"Seems like it ain't just swappin' of bullets that Pete's cravin' now," Idaho explained. "He lets on he'd like to match you fist and skull. Says he could easy lick you if you didn't run too fast."

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"He'd be the one to run," growled Ranse, his face reddening and the end of his mustache bristling belligerently. "I could lick the little runt with one hand tied, and they ain't nothin' would do me any more good," he boasted.

"Might be he was just bluffin'," Idaho suggested.

"He'll be given a chance to back down," quickly responded Ranse. "I'll meet him anywhere he says, and I'll stay with him till the owls holler. Ain't no man can accuse me of pizenin' a water hole and keep a whole hide."

"He—he—er—I'll find out what he's got to say to that," Idaho stammered, thoroughly frightened at his success in stirring up the soft-spoken rancher into a fighting mood.

IT was more than a pricking conscience that disturbed Idaho as he rode away in the direction of Pete Renfro's place, three miles distant. He was becoming uneasy, for he had undoubtedly started something he could not easily stop, something that threatened to have a serious ending. Mack had said he couldn't prove what he said. Well, he was about to prove something.

He had really expected Ranse to find some excuse for evading a physical encounter with Pete. It was too late to back out now. It wouldn't be fair to leave his job half done. He must tell Pete lies such as he had used to stir up Ranse. He had thought at first that the two men were too old to hurt each other seriously in a fistic bout, and it would certainly give them more respect for each other; but when he looked again upon Ranse's huge form and considered Pete's wiry muscle, he had misgivings.

By the time Idaho reached Pete Renfro's place, he had a severe attack of cold feet, chills of apprehension. Only the realization that his failure to carry out his scheme would put the rancher in a false light prompted him to go on. If he stopped here, Ranse would naturally think that Pete had shown the white feather.

But Pete wasn't to be easily found. It was well toward noon before Idaho located him at an outlying sheep camp. It took longer this time, too, to get around to the subject, for the ranchman was in conversation with one of his herders. Perhaps he was suspicious, since Idaho's visit of the day before was still fresh in his mind.

"He's tellin' around that he could lick you with one hand tied, providin' he could ketch you," Idaho finally got in. "Says he could take a lightnin' bug on a corncob and run you clear outn the country, if he was a mind to."

"You mean that—that old bag o' wind has been shootin' off his head ag'in?" inquired Pete.

"Yes, he claims you run every time you see him comin', or he'd got you long ago," Idaho replied.

"Huh, if he hadn't hid hisself behind a tree like a sneakin' coyote, I'd got him for keeps that time I put a bullet in his shoulder. He talks a heap, but I reckon he ain't got no stummick for powder and lead."

"He ain't after no gun play this time," Idaho explained. "He wants to fight it out to a finish with fists, no bitin' or hair pullin'."

"To fight with fists, huh?" Pete murmured.

As with Ranse, Idaho noticed Pete pale a little at mention of a physical battle. Yet both these men had been known to shoot at the drop of a hat.

"Yeah, he says he's ready any

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time and any place you name. Bein' a friend of yourn, I figger'd I ought to tell you."

"Yes, yes, glad you told me, Idaho," Pete responded.

"The old Four Mile dobe would be a good place, bein' as it's on land that don't belong to neither one of you; and they ain't no time better'n around four o'clock," Idaho suggested.

"Four o'clock to-day?"

"Ain't no time like right now for callin' a feller's bluff."

"I reckon he is just bluffin," said Pete, obviously relieved at thought of such a possibility.

"It's easy to find out. You make it over to the old dobe by four o'clock, and if he don't show up when you've waited twenty minutes, you've got him licked," Idaho replied.

"All right, Idaho, I'll be there. You hang around for a witness. Chances is the old windbag will take to his heels when he sees me, but either way around, his braggin' will be stopped for good."

As Idaho turned away, he saw Pete Renfro wipe beads of sweat from his forehead. Something funny about that. He recalled that Ranse Morton had done the very same thing, and it was not a very warm day. Could it be that these two men were both ranting cowards, as he had told Mack they were?

Idaho had never felt meaner in his life than he did when he delivered Pete's acceptance of the challenge, naming the time and place. He saw Ranse wilt perceptibly, and wondered why. The ranchman's only response was a nod of assent, and then he went off to saddle his horse. Erect and proud as he was, he somehow lacked the fire of a man that was going to meet an enemy in battle.

Maintaining strict neutrality, Idaho went on alone, leaving Ranse to come later. There was no doubt in his mind now that the two men would meet. At the old deserted adobe, Idaho waited. Communing with himself in the stillness of the spring afternoon, he had abundant time to regret his action. He was disgusted with himself, and hated the whole despicable scheme.

He knew he ought to tell the two men of the trick he had played on them, before they went too far. He would tell them. He finally concluded to wait until they had proved beyond a doubt the courage they proclaimed. If they met and came to blows, he would step in and tell the whole story—that he alone was at fault, that Pete had never accused Ranse of poisoning his water hole, and that Ranse was innocent of accusing his one-time partner of killing his cattle.

It was a quarter of four when Idaho detected two clouds of dust in opposite directions, and it wasn't long before two horsemen appeared on opposite sectors of the horizon. There wasn't five minutes' difference in their arrival. They left their horses some distance away, and walked up to where Idaho stood waiting. Ranse was twenty steps away when Pete arrived.

"Tell him—I'm plumb ready for him, Idaho—if I did git here a mite behind," panted Ranse as he came up. "I ain't spoke to him for nigh thirteen years, and I ain't agoin' to be the first to start it now."

Idaho conveyed the wishes of Ranse to Pete, who could very easily have heard for himself without having it relayed. But when one man doesn't speak to another, he doesn't hear either.

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"Just wait where you are," Idaho cried, as the combatants pulled off their coats. "This has got to be done accordin' to Hoyle. Now the first thing for you fellers to do is walk up and shake hands with each other before arry lick is struck, just to show it's goin' to be a fair fight. Remember, they ain't to be no scratchin' or bitin', and no hair pullin'. It's just fist and skull. Now go to it."

WITHOUT a word, the two men advanced warily, each extending his right hand. Idaho, watching closely, could see their breasts heave, as with a great emotion, and marveled that these grizzled veterans could harbor such animosity for each other. They clasped hands, and for a moment remained like two statues.

"Break away there and begin' fightin'. You ain't supposed to shake hands all day," Idaho shouted as the two stood awkwardly hesitant. It looked for a moment as if both were showing the white feather.

Then they fell back a step and began flailing out with unpracticed blows, striking ineffectively now and then. Idaho realized that, indeed, these two men would never hurt each other seriously. Both would be winded before an eye could be blacked or a face bruised. No use to let them go on, though. They had proved their courage. Neither could one call the other a coward.

Idaho stepped forward and raised a hand. The men ceased the futile efforts, apparently welcoming the interruption.

"It ain't fair," Idaho began.

"Ain't fair?" growled Ranse. "I ain't bit, scratched, nor pulled hair arry time."

"I mean it ain't fair for you two fellers to fight," Idaho explained.

"What you mean it ain't fair?" queried Pete, obviously glad of the breathing spell.

"I mean it was just a pack o' lies I told to bring the fight on," Idaho answered. "Ranse, Pete never did say you pizened his water hole and fired his haystack. I lied just to git you riled up, and I packed tales back'ards and for'ards, just to see could I git you fightin' mad. You've both done proved you ain't cowards, and I reckon that's enough. Ain't no use to keep on till one or tother of you gits hurt."

The two stood for a moment, glaring uncertainly at Idaho. It was as if the statement trickled slowly into befuddled brains. Pete was the first to speak, an angry tremor in his voice.

"You mean you lied on me?" he demanded.

"Well, you see——"

"And you made up all them yarns you was tellin' me just to see if I'd fight?" Ranse interrupted.

"Yes, but I——"

Again Idaho's speech was cut short, but this time it was by a slap from Ranse Morton's hamlike fist. It was a surprise, for it sent Idaho sprawling. Ranse's blows had appeared so ineffective before. Before Idaho hit the ground, he was jerked to his feet to feel Pete Renfro's hard fist planted on his left eye. That, too, was a surprise.

It seemed a long time to Idaho that he was being tossed, like a bean bag, from one to the other of the men he had egged on to fight each other. Finally a harder crack than usual on the head made him a little groggy. Half consciously, he felt his legs lifted from the ground, and heard Pete's voice.

"Take ahold of his arms, Ranse, and let's pitch him in the water hole," Pete was saying.

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IDAHO felt himself lifted from the ground, carried a little way, and swung back and forth like a sack of potatoes about to be thrown upon a wagon. Suddenly released, he sailed through the air for a short space, and fell with a splash into the water hole back of the old adobe house.

Coughing and sputtering, he came to the surface, his brain cleared by the cold plunge. The water was barely waist-deep, and he had little difficulty in wading out. He shook the water from ears and eyes, and sat down upon a rock while rivulets flowed from his saturated clothing. He pulled off his boots and emptied them, then stood up. He tried to look around for his assailants, but one eye was almost closed and the other blurry with water.

The next moment he heard the clatter of hoofs, and knew that the two men were gone. Groping his way to his own horse, he mounted and rode homeward. It was dark when he arrived there, chilled to the bone in his wet clothes. He unsaddled his horse, and waited shivering until his old partner blew out the light and went to bed. He was in no shape to meet Mack's searching glance or to answer his question.

Like a thief in the night, he crept in and went to bed. His smarting injuries kept him awake for a long time, and when he awoke in the morning, he could scarcely move. He lay in bed, professing to have a strange malady, while Mack cooked breakfast.

"I'm sore all over, Mack," he declared. "Whatever 'tis I got come over me all of a suddent, and goes clear to the marrer of my bones."

"How come your clothes all wet?" Mack asked.

"I—I fell in the creek," Idaho mumbled.

"That when you got your face all bunged up?" Mack continued with unconcealed suspicion.

"I reckon so. I was in a kinda daze, and didn't seem to know just what was happenin' till I hit the water," Idaho replied, drawing the blanket quickly over his head.

"Maybe that di-plomacy of yourn back-fired on you," Mack suggested, with something suspiciously like a chuckle.

"Quit talkin', Mack; it hurts my head," said Idaho weakly.

Mack said no more, but had Idaho peeped from beneath the blanket, he might have surprised a broad grin on his old partner's face. Mack knew the marks of a human fist when he saw them.

After a while, when Mack went out to do the morning chores, Idaho crawled out of bed, surveyed his face in the cracked mirror, and put on his bruises some healing salve. When he heard a sound at the door, he crept quickly back to bed and turned his face to the wall.

It was afternoon when Idaho got up, and even then he preferred the subdued light of the cabin's interior to the glare of outdoors. About the middle of the afternoon he heard voices, and peeping through a crack, he saw Jim Chastain talking to Mack out by the gate. Waiting anxiously where he was, he breathed a sigh of relief when Chastain rode away. Soon after that, Mack came in.

"What was Jim Chastain wantin'?" Idaho asked.

"Just spreadin' news and findin' out what he could," Mack answered. "You might say Jim had a nose for news."

"You—you didn't tell him that I —er—I mean you didn't tell him anything, did you?" Idaho anxiously inquired.

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"I didn't tell him about you gittin' a black eye and possum tracks on your face, if that's what you mean," Mack replied.

"What did he have to tell?"

"Somethin' mighty surprisin'. He says that Ranse Morton and Pete Renfro was both in town this mornin' walkin' around arm in arm, crackin' jokes, and settin' 'em up to everybody. I reckon they've shook hands and made up."

"I seen 'em when they shook hands," said Idaho, a happy grin struggling through his swollen lips.

"You mean you——"

"I mean I made 'em shake hands," Idaho proudly declared.

"Well, how come——"

"The rest is a secret I ain't givin' away, and I reckon Ranse nor Pete won't," Idaho hastily interrupted. "It might be that one of 'em spoke to the other kinda unconsciouslike, startin' things rollin', and it might be some other way."

Idaho forgot his sore muscles and smarting bruises. His di-plomacy had brought the desired result after all.

In Next Week's Issue, "THE SHERIFF'S SON," by LLOYD ERIC REEVE.

THE DRUM RELIGION OF THE INDIANS

ONE of the strangest of American cults is the drum religion of the Menominees and other Midwest Indian tribes. Believed to have originated with an "inspired" Sioux prophetess more than a half century ago, this religion is a curious mixture of Christianity and paganism. Some of the weird music of its ceremonies has been recorded by Frances Densmore, a collaborator of the Smithsonian Institution, who succeeded in winning the confidence of the Indians.

The rites of the cult are centered about a sacred drum "with a heart inside it." A bell is suspended within the drum. When this rings as the instrument is beaten, it signifies that any request made will be granted. The drum is supposed to be a copy of one made originally by the prophetess, following the instructions of the spirits.

The sacred drums are passed from band to band of believers. Rattlesnake, leader of the cult among the Menominees, thus described it for Miss Densmore: "There is really only one drum in the world. If I go anywhere, in any tribe where there is a drum, I am welcome and given a seat, and those people have their seat whenever they come here. Whenever I run across a band of Indians with a drum, those people have been trying to do right."

Among the teachings, as described by Rattlesnake, are the following: "If any one tries to quarrel with you, walk away. If any one is talking bad about any one, walk away. If a bad scheme is afloat, walk away. The drum religion is strictly against moonshine and teaches that men must not steal."

During a ceremonial, members contribute money to the drum. This is in the nature of an insurance fund, for use in case of illness or misfortune. Any member of the cult, when in need, can draw upon this fund with the consent of the others.

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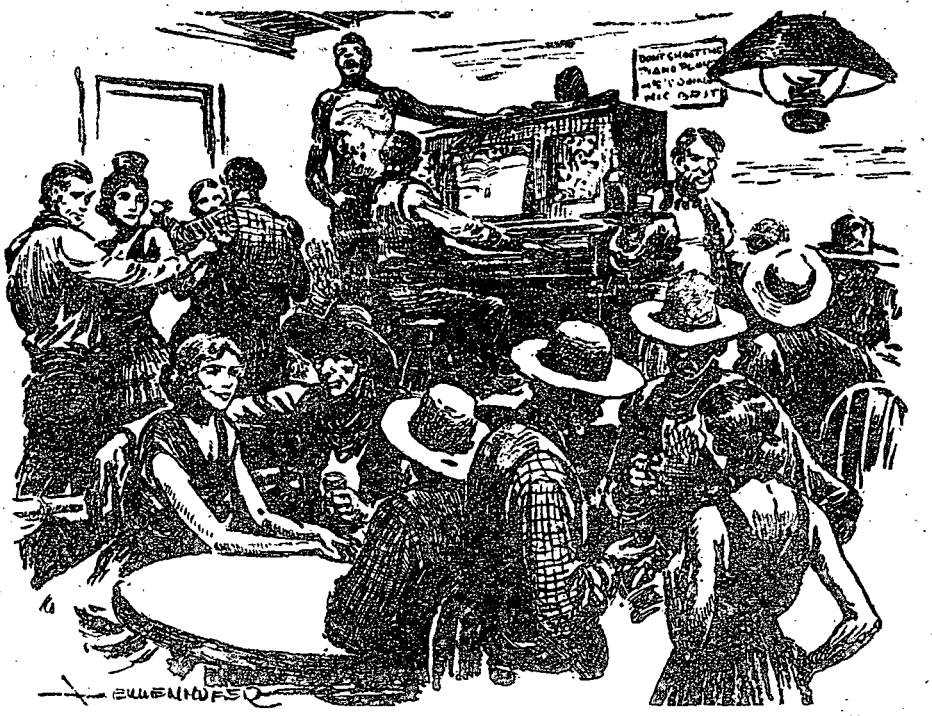

Sharps and Gats

By HARRY R. KELLER

NOW, "Mighty Mike" McCann
Was a music-minded man,
Mostly seen about the dance halls of the West;
And the classic "Old Zip Coon"
Was McCann's most-favored tune,
So he had the music tatooed on his chest.

When the dance-hall doors swung wide,
Mike would cast his shirt aside,
And beside the tin piano take his place.
While the player strummed the score,
Mighty Mike would stand and roar,
With a high, artistic rapture on his face.

It becomes my task to tell
How grim tragedy befell
Mighty Mike upon a sultry summer night.
He was singing "Old Zip Coon"
In a border-town saloon,
When a bunch of rowdies staged a six-gun fight.

When the gun smoke cleared away,
There the lusty singer lay,
With a dozen bullets tunneling his chest.
But he wasn't wholly dead,
So they bundled him to bed,
For to take himself a nice protracted rest.

Seven weary months from then
Mike was on his feet again,
So he hied him to a dancing hall once more.
There he cast aside his shirt,
Though the gesture sorely hurt,
And prepared to sing the old familiar score.

But his chest was bullet-scarred,
And the score was sadly marred;
The pianist played the only notes he saw.
And a look of vast surprise
Crept into Mike's misty eyes,
For the tune he heard was "Turkey in the Straw"!

With chagrin upon his face,
Mike the Mighty left the place;
Disappointment stung him keenly as a quirt.
Since his best-beloved tune
Is the classic "Old Zip Coon,"
At the dances now he never shucks his shirt!

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BOSS FOR A DAY

By JOSEPH F. HOOK

Author of "Dangerous Dough Pounder," etc.

THAT hombre wants to speak to you—the one that the Flyin' A boys brung in last night," the deputy announced.

A peculiar smile illuminated Sheriff Conley's features for a moment, then disappeared.

"O. K., Buck," he said. "I had an idee he'd git the jitters and want to cough up. Well, he's saved hisself a lotta grief."

"Red" Raymond was young, tall, and wiry. Curls peeped out from beneath the wide brim of his sombrero, and there was a twinkle in his blue eyes. His face, tanned a deep brown by wind and sun, seemed open and frank. Altogether, he bore the appearance of an honest, dyed-in-the-wool cowboy, a son of the plains, instead of a notorious outlaw.

But during a long and adventurous career, Sheriff Conley had met several blue-eyed, frank-faced bandits, who shot even while they smiled, and he wasn't at all impressed. He had long ago come to the conclusion that you couldn't judge the character of a man by looking at his face.

"Open up, young feller," he snapped gruffly, "and git it off yore chest, 'cause I'm one busy man. And don't try handin' me no fast line,

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if you savvy what's healthy for you."

Red rubbed a match along his chap-covered leg and calmly lighted a cigarette, sizing the sheriff up at the same time.

"Well, in the first place," he began, "I'm not Red Raymond. I'm Red Clements. Does that mean anything to you?"

The sheriff waved a huge hand through the air. "P'ff!" he snorted. "Jest another alias, that's all. Mebbe you've got a dozen more. Quién sabe? Git on with the story."

"O. K. And here's the low-down. My brother Bud and me——"

"Hold yore hosses a minute," the sheriff cut in, his brow suddenly wrinkling. "Bud Clements, eh? Let's see. Wasn't that the name of the guy Dirk Dexter's gang bumped off?"

"The same, sheriff—my brother."

"So he was yore brother, eh?" the sheriff remarked, with a world of hidden meaning in his voice. "Proceed."

"Me and Bud leased a ranch, down Clear Creek way, over in the next county," Red said, "and run up agin' purty tough sleddin', right off the bat. So Bud figgered he'd take in the Ellensburg rodeo and try to cop off the bulldoggin' event. The first prize was three hundred bucks, cash. He won it and started home, that same night. But the Dexter gang had took in the rodeo, too, and they laid for Bud. Guess he put up a scrap, and they plugged him."

"Yeah, that's all ancient hist'ry to me," the sheriff said impatiently. "What else?"

"You and Sheriff Rawlings j'ined hands and took the trail, and got nowheres quick," Red went on, and saw the sheriff flinch. "Meantime I'd laid low, figgerin' not to butt in. But when you guys couldn't cut the mustard, I took the trail myself. And, like you, I didn't git to first base. Dirk Dexter and his gang seemed to have vanished inta thin air. But I swore I'd git him, and I didn't quit."

"I'm still list'nin'," the sheriff observed dryly.

"I knowed it was up to me to find where the gang hid out," Red continued, "before I could find Dirk and plug him. But when I couldn't locate him, I hit on an idee to make him come to me. So I took a *pasear* over to Rawhide, where nobody knowed me, and pretended I was one tough hombre."

"Oh, I savvy." The sheriff sneered openly. "You was jest *pretendin'* you was bad, eh? Go on and let's hear some more."

"Then I picked out a coupla guys, who blabbed everything they heard, and told 'em I'd killed a man or two and was figgerin' on pullin' a holdup. Well, them two babies got busy talkin', jest as I thought they would, and it wasn't long before Dirk Dexter got my hist'ry. Anyways, one day a guy tapped me in the ribs with a gun and told me to find another pasture to graze in, unless I was lookin' for sudden death. He didn't beat around the bush about who he was. He said he belonged to the Dexter gang."

"Then why didn't you plug him?" the sheriff shot at him.

" 'Cause I wanted Dirk Dexter, not one of his men. For all I know, he might've been Dirk. I didn't know, and I wanted to be sure. I was certain that if I could git into that hide-out, I'd take care of Dirk and the gang, too."

"A minute ago you said you only wanted Dirk. Now you're includin' the gang. Did you ever hear about such a thing as a feller contradictin' hisself?"

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RED ignored the question, and resumed: "I saw my chance and grabbed it, by offerin' to join the gang. The guy said he'd put it up to Dirk. In a couple days he was back and said that Dirk had took up on the proposition. That's how I come to be an outlaw."

"Then you shot Dirk." The sheriff laughed cynically, while the deputy guffawed loudly.

Red let the thrust pass. "But Dirk Dexter proved to be one foxy hombre," he related. "He was born suspicious of everybody, and slept with one eye open. And no matter where he went, he allus had somebody with him. That gummed the game for me, 'cause I knowed that if I'd took a shot at him, I'd never have moved outta my tracks alive. Savvy?"

"I ain't sayin' a word—now," the sheriff remarked significantly.

"Things stayed that way for a long time," Red said, "and it looked like I was never goin' to revenge Bud. Then along come an idee. I figgered I'd watch my chance and quit the gang and turn 'em inta the sheriff."

"Meanin' me." The sheriff smiled. "I'd 'a' been right handy, o' course."

"But I knowed I'd have to pull it so's it'd look sorta natural. So when we made that raid on the Flyin' A spread, and the boys started throwing lead at us, my hoss throwed me, and I let the boys ketch me. You know the rest."

"Oh, I see. You're sech a pore rider the hoss throwed you. Well, we'll swaller that with a bucketful o' salt and proceed to yore proposition. What is it?"

"Seein' as I can't git a crack at Dirk alone, I'll lead you to the gang's hide-out. You couldn't find it if you was standin' on top of it."

The sheriff's chair suddenly shot backward as he came to his feet, his face purple and working with anger.

"You lyin' whelp!" he roared. "What kind of a sucker d'yer take me for, handin' me a line like that? You've been ketched cold turkey, and now you're figgerin' to effect an escape by a pack o' lies? Thin? Why, that yarn's thinner than round-up soup. Lead me to the gang's hide-out, eh? And bust loose from me on the way, I s'pose. Oh, no, you don't!"

A look of disappointment came into Red's eyes. "Then you don't believe me?"

"Believe you?" the sheriff bellowed. "Why, I can prove you a liar by the clock! I know all about the shootin' o' young Bud Clements, and I've got a written record of it in that there desk. And it don't say nothin' about no brother. That's where you slipped up in yore story. Now, I s'pose, you've got gall enough to ask me to leave you outta jail till you round up somebody to identify you, eh?"

"Sheriff, you're passin' up the chance of a lifetime!" the rider persisted. "I've told you the truth. I'll prove it by takin' you and a posse to Dirk Dexter's hide-out!"

"You shore will lead me to it." The sheriff laughed harshly. "The fact is, this cock-and-bull story has given me a swell idee. Buck," he said to the deputy, "git a bunch o' the boys together, and tell 'em to saddle up and ride over here, pronto."

HE stepped to Red's side and, before the young man knew what it was all about, slipped a handcuff on his wrist, snapping the other around his own.

"That's how much I trust you," he snarled. "And here's somethin'

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else. I'm callin' yore bluff and raisin' you. When I return to this office, I'll have the hull Dexter gang in tow, *or I'll return alone!* Do I make myself plain? Now jest where's this hide-out?"

"In Forlorn Canyon," Red answered. "No use tryin' to describe it, 'cause you would be no wiser. You'll know where it is when you git there."

"And you know what'll happen to you if it ain't there. Come on."

Handcuffed, Red rode out of Cantle alongside the sheriff. Behind them rode a dozen men, silent, grim and determined. The deputy had told them of what had transpired in the office, and they were all skeptical of Red's story. He was a member of Dirk Dexter's cutthroat gang, caught red-handed, and that was enough for them.

"It's a trap, sheriff," a member of the posse blurted out, unable to contain himself any longer, "and you're goin' to run right smack inta it with yore eyes wide open!"

"I'm takin' them chances, Hank," the sheriff replied. "But if I do, there'll be two of us in it when it snaps shet." Here he glanced at Red significantly. "Anyways, if it'll have the effect o' bringin' Dirk Dexter inta the open, that's O. K. by me. I never saw the killer I couldn't outshoot, given an even break."

"And you never saw the killer yet that'd give you or any one else an even break," Hank retorted.

The sheriff made no reply to that, but rode on in silence. The heat was terrific, and waves of it shimmered up from the ground into the men's faces. It felt like clouds of steam when they breathed it into their lungs, hot and suffocating. Gray dust hung in a pall above the cavalcade, and men and horses were covered with it.

At high noon, when the sun beat down with double intensity, they reached the foothills, and halted for a bite, a drink; then on once more. Night overtook them on the banks of Mule Creek, a tired, surly group of men. A camp fire was soon started and a pot of water hung over it on a forked stick.

The sheriff issued orders regarding the care of the horses. Blankets were spread upon the ground, and the posse lay down to rest. Forlorn Canyon, their destination, was still a long way off.

"Hank, you stand watch for half the night," the sheriff directed, "and I'll have Tubby Mallam relieve you at twelve. And, Jake, there's coffee in my saddlebags. Git busy and brew it."

"Lemme make the coffee, sheriff," Red begged. "I'm stiff from ridin', and I'd like to stretch my legs."

"Fly at it," the sheriff agreed. "But, remember, I'll keep an eye on you. Step away from that fire, and I'll perforate you!"

He took the key out of his pocket and unlocked the handcuffs. A rider handed Red the coffee and silently pointed to the fire.

"Try makin' a break," he hissed. "I'm fair itchin' to take jest one crack at you, you murderin' coyote!"

The sheriff's sharp ears caught the threat. "Steady there, Jake," he warned. "Put a hackamore on that temper o' yourn."

WHEN the coffee was ready, Red carried the pot around the circle, filling the tin cups the men held out. Glances of hate bored through him, and his ears tingled with low-spoken curses as he passed. Only the restraining presence of the sheriff kept the posse from actual violence.

"You and me'll flop on this

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blanket and grab what sleep we can," the sheriff said, locking one handcuff around Red's wrist, the other around his own. "And the rest o' you boys had better do the same, 'cause we'll hit the saddle afore dawn, so's to ketch that gang in Forlorn Canyon while they're asleep."

"Forlorn Canyon, me foot!" a rider growled in disgust. "It'll be a trap, more like."

There followed mutterings and whisperings among the posse, but they soon quieted down and fell asleep. That is, with a single exception. The exception was Red.

He lay on his back, to all intents and purposes studying the canopy of stars, though actually listening intently to the snores. An hour went by, and then Red turned over slowly on his side. One hand cautiously explored the person of the sleeping sheriff until the fingers disappeared into a pocket. There followed a faint click, as the handcuff on the rider's wrist opened, and the key was returned to where Red had found it.

He rolled over on his back again and remained perfectly quiet. Evidently satisfied that all was well, he rose to his knees, then his feet, and finally stood erect.

The night was as black as ink, but Red needed no light to carry out the purpose he had in mind. Every inch of that ground was perfectly familiar to him, as indeed it was to the rest of the Dexter gang. Nevertheless, he stepped away from the sheriff's side with infinite caution, his head turned slightly, still listening to the snores and the cropping of grass by the horses on their picket lines.

On tiptoe he reached the animals, and stood still. A husky snore near at hand caused him to direct his steps in that direction. Hank, whom the sheriff had appointed guard, was sitting with his back propped against the thin trunk of a willow, fast asleep.

Red went down on one knee, and again those long, tapering fingers went to work on the man's belt buckle. When at length the rider stood up, the guard's belt and guns were around his waist. After that it required only a few moments to locate his own saddle and horse, slap it on, and mount.

Grass muffled the sound of the animal's hoofs as Red headed it toward the creek, and the water, splashing against the boulders in its path, could not be distinguished from the splashing the horse made. Thus, for about half a mile, horse and rider traveled, with the foaming water lapping at the stirrups.

Then, instinctively, the horse swung north, for the trail was as familiar to it as to its master. Here a tiny mountain stream came down to join the main body of Mule Creek, and keeping the horse to the bed of it, Red rode onward and upward.

At last the horse stepped out onto dry land, and broke into a fast lope, heading due west. Red dropped the lines over the horn, letting the animal have its head. Then he twisted around in the saddle and smiled for the first time since his capture by the Flying A men.

"Well, you shore was easy, Mr. Sheriff," he said. "But that posse was a tough proposition. They purty night gummed up my game."

"Who's that?"

The challenge rang through the night like the crack of a rifle. Red reined in his horse, and lost no time replying.

"That you, Pete?" he called. "Well, this is me—Red."

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"Red!" came the cry of surprise. "Why—why, I thought you was in the jug, in Cantle. How didya——"

The voice paused suddenly, and Red distinctly heard the ominous click of a raised gum hammer.

"Strike a match, and hold it close to yore face!" came the command. "I'm takin' no chances, feller!"

RED hastened to comply. "So you thought I was in the jug, eh, Pete? Well, so did the sheriff. But here I am. Take a good look at my mug, and then holster that gun."

The man called Pete loomed up out of the darkness alongside the rider.

"Holy cow!" he exclaimed. "Say, won't Dirk be tickled pink to see you? And the boys, too! Come on and let's wake 'em up. How didja manage to bust out, Red?"

"Wait a while, Pete, till we reach the others, then I'll tell you a story that'll slit yore sides. Yes, sir-ree! I shore put a fast one over on the sheriff."

The water trail Red had followed was the first part of the answer to the question why no officer of the law had ever succeeded in tracking down Dirk Dexter and his gang. The second part of the answer was unfolded as the men rode their way through a clump of bushes and into the mouth of what looked like a cave.

In reality, it was the opening to a box canyon, with high, narrow walls of limestone, which almost met overhead. In a few minutes this narrow passage opened up into a tiny bowl, where a gang of men and their horses could hide in safety for months. One man alone, placed on guard at the entrance, could have held a dozen posses at bay indefinitely.

In the center of the bowl was a spring, and near it a fire, which burned with a dull glow as the ashes cooled. Around it, in the pale halo it cast, lay a dozen men, sound asleep. Pete went over to one of them and gently shook him.

"Wake up, Dirk!" he cried. "Wake up and take a look at who's here!"

Red strolled over to the fire and kicked it into life just as the leader of the outlaw band raised up on one elbow and stared hard at him.

"Red, shore as shootin'!" he muttered. "Hey, boys, wake up! Red's back!"

The men arose and crowded around the young rider. Cries of genuine surprise were mingled with a string of questions.

"Gather round, fellers," Red said, "and listen to how little Red tricked the wise ol' sheriff."

"Boy, you've shore got yore nerve!" Dirk exclaimed, admiration in his voice, when Red had finished his story. "And that ol' hayseed actually thought you was goin' to lead him here, eh?"

"Well, yes and no, Dirk. But it's a cinch he was goin' to *make* me do it. That's why he put the bracelet on me."

Dirk Dexter screwed down his eyelids until the pupils were tiny point of fire, and a string of oaths tumbled from his lips.

"Sheriff Conley, eh?" he snarled. "Well, I've waited a long time for the chance to settle that ol' fox's hash. He's done run me ragged, plenty times. Now we'll turn the tables on him, as you suggest, Red. Instead of him nailin' us afore we're awake, we'll ride down to Mule Creek and fix him and his posse."

"I've a better plan than that, Dirk," Red offered.

Dirk's hand dropped quickly to

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one of the guns in his belt, and an ugly expression twisted the corners of his mouth.

"You heard me," he growled. "I'm boss o' this gang, feller!"

"Nobody's goin' to argue that, Dirk," Red said. "But don't you think I got somethin' to say about this, seein' as how I laid the trap and led them hombres inta it? Now listen. I ain't never asked you for nothin', but I'm goin' to do it now. Lemme be boss o' this gang for a day and I'll——"

"Not a blamed minute!" Dirk roared. "You'll do jest what I say, feller, or——"

A MURMUR of disapproval arose from the men. They believed Red entitled to some consideration, and were not at all backward about saying so. Dirk was quick to appraise the ugly temper of the gang, and grudgingly assented to Red's request.

"All right," he said. "You'll be boss for a day. But only one day, mind you. Now whadda wanna do?"

"We'll saddle up before dawn," Red explained, "and head for Wild Rose Gulch. We'd oughta make it by sunup. Then we'll lay for the sheriff and his men, on their way back to Cantle. But if we was to tackle 'em in the willows at Mule Creek, there'd be the chance of some of 'em crawlin' inta cover, and then we'd be in a fix."

The men voiced their approval of Red's plan of action. It went against the grain for Dirk to take orders from any one, but he knew better than to stand out against the majority.

"Well, you fellers better git back to sleep," he suggested, " 'cause we'll hafta start early."

"What about Pete?" Red inquired. "I don't see no need for him to go back to the mouth of the canyon and stand guard. The sheriff's a long way from here, and fast asleep."

"No," Dirk agreed. "He can git some shut-eye, too. And you, Red, had better flop on this blanket with me."

When the men had again settled down for the night, the outlaw leader reached over and tapped Red on the knee.

"Say, I'm goin' to tell you somethin'," he began, in a low voice. "Up till to-night, I ain't been none too shore o' you. Get what I mean, Red? I've done watched you like a hawk, and I didn't see you takin' hold like you meant business. Fact is, I was goin' to leave you in the jug at Cantle, so's you'd mebbe git yore neck stretched."

"I guess I was kinda slow gittin' started," Red admitted.

"I'll say you was. But now that the barrier's down, looks like you're goin' to turn out to be the fastest worker I ever had in the gang. And I'm not goin' to fergit you for givin' me this chance to wipe out Conley and his bunch o' yes men. Folks is goin' to learn that it means sudden death to try to ketch Dirk Dexter."

"I can hardly wait till time to saddle up, Dirk."

"Well, I gotta be gittin' some more shut-eye," the leader yawned. "Me and the boys was playin' poker, till an hour afore you showed up, and we're shore sleepy. It's up to you, Red, to see we don't sleep in. You was always a light sleeper, anyways."

"What about yoreself, Dirk?"

"Well," the leader said, "I had to sorta keep one eye on you, Red. But now that we understand one another, I can have one good night's sleep, at least."

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So it wasn't long before a series of snores filled the night air. The fire soon died down again to a dull glow, and the hoot of an owl echoed weirdly through the canyon.

But Red did not sleep. He lay on his back, as he had done a few hours before, staring wide-eyed at the star-speckled sky, wondering just what the dawn would bring. He was playing a desperate game, and he realized that the odds were stacked against him. But the die was cast now, and there could be no turning back.

IT was still dark when Red began applying the toe of his riding boot to the men's ribs, nudging them awake gently. "On yore feet, fellers!" he sang out. "Saddle up and let's ramble! Shake a leg!"

The men sat up, rubbing their eyes, yawning, some of them grumbling at having been disturbed at what they termed an ungodly hour. Then some one yelled for coffee.

"Coffee!" Red sneered. "You wanna pass up the chance of wipin' out the sheriff and his posse for a cup o' coffee, you fool?"

The man addressed took immediate offense, but Dirk Dexter cursed him long and fluently.

"You heard what he told you," he thundered. "Or have you fergotten Red is boss to-day? Mebbe a slug through the skull would jar them brains o' yourn loose. Hustle up, you! And that goes for the rest o' you splay-footed wallopers. Speed's what we want now."

The gang finally swung into the saddle and got going. And by the time it was light enough to distinguish objects at any distance, they caught a glimpse of the sheriff and the posse drawing near to the mouth of Wild Rose Canyon.

"Dig in the hooks, and lay on with them quirts!" Red ordered. "We ain't got none too much time to spare, fellers!"

He led the way at breakneck speed, dipping down into dry washes, taking trail after trail that not only kept them out of sight but which brought them to the end of their journey ahead of their victims.

Wild Rose Canyon was a freak of nature. Narrow and long, it formed a part of the main road to Cantle. In prehistoric times water had gushed over its sides, washing away all surface dirt and wearing deep niches in the limestone formation. The floor of the canyon twisted and turned like a snake in agony, forming shoulders at intervals around which nothing could be seen.

The Dexter gang left their horses in a hollow, and then slipped over the rim on all fours, like so many wriggling snakes. Red posted a man in each niche and cautioned him to flatten his body against the rock, to keep from being spotted.

"I'm goin' back to the rim," he announced, "where I can see them fellers when they ride around the bend. And when I give the word, step out and let 'em have it. But don't shoot wild. Take good aim and shoot to kill."

Hardly had Red scrambled back and crouched behind a clump of wild rose, from which the canyon derived its name, when he caught the sound of approaching hoofbeats.

"Timed to a gnat's hair!" he muttered. "Now for the ace in the hole!"

The hoofbeats drew louder, and a cloud of dust arose above the rim of the canyon. Then, suddenly around the bend came the sheriff and his men. Red waited a moment until all were in full view, and then yelled to the outlaws below.

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"Step out, boys, and pour it inta them!"

In his eagerness for the kill, Dirk Dexter stepped out from his niche a split second ahead of the rest. There was a smile of triumph on his face as he raised one of his guns and took deliberate aim at the sheriff, who with his men had been caught flat-footed, too startled to draw in time and defend themselves.

DIRK'S men were now ranged beside and behind him, their guns trained on the posse. A half-dozen fingers pressed as many triggers. And the only response to that effort came in the form of half a dozen metallic clicks.

A puzzled look spread over the men's faces. Dirk glanced at his gun, and then began tearing frantically at the shells in his belt.

"It's empty!" he yelled, referring to the gun. "We've been double-crossed by that——"

A thin jet of flame, followed by a crashing report, came from the gun of a posse man. Dirk Dexter clawed at his chest, and went down in a heap. Seeing their leader down, the rest of the gang turned and ran just as a hail of lead from the posse tore down the canyon.

Two men stumbled and pitched forward on their faces in the dust. With a wild yell, the posse thundered after the fleeing men and rode them down before they were able to load their empty guns from their belts.

Red holstered his gun and slid down the steep bank. The sheriff stared at his white, drawn face in amazement.

"Well, sheriff," Red panted, "you've seen what happened. Now are you goin' to believe my story?"

"When it's finished," the sheriff replied, breathing a sigh of relief. "What was the idee of runnin' out on me last night? Why didn't you put me wise?"

"Because you wouldn't have believed me, that's why. And another thing, sheriff: I did lie to you. I had no intention of leadin' you to Dirk Dexter's hang-out, first, 'cause we wouldn've been shot to ribbons before we got anywhere near it. You'll believe that when I take you there."

"First? Then there was another reason, eh?"

"Yeah. The other reason was that I swore I'd git Dirk for killin' Bud, and I wasn't goin' to let nobody else do it. I had to fool you in order to fool Dirk. Where is the feller you call Hank? I wanta give him his guns back."

"He's busy hog-tyin' them hombres. But how in Sam Hill did you git them guns offn Hank?"

"That was easier than foolin' you, sheriff." Red smiled. "You was all drugged."

"Drugged?" the sheriff repeated, astounded. "How come?"

"Jest a day or so before the raid on the Flyin' A spread," Red explained, "I'd figgered to dope the gang's coffee, plug Dirk Dexter, and then turn the gang inta the sheriff. So I rode inta town and bought some dope, and kep' it hid in my hatband."

"I see now," the sheriff said. "And you slipped it in our coffee 'stead o' the gang's. No wonder we slept in. I thought I saw you pour yours on the ground, but I wasn't sure."

"Well, I didn't have to drug Dirk, even if I'd had the chance," Red went on. "Tellin' him I had you in a trap was drug enough. He trusted me, for the first and last time. Takin' the shells outta the men's

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guns while they slept was simple. The only danger then was that they'd notice it in the morning. Mebbe the sight of the shells in their belts satisfied 'em.

"But when they got up, Dirk helped out by hustlin' 'em inta the saddle, he was that anxious to plug you, and they didn't have time to notice nothin' except where they was ridin' in the dark."

"Say, listen, young feller," the sheriff suddenly said. "What you aimin' to do now?"

"Go back to the ranch," Red replied.

"Oh, no, you ain't goin' back to no ranch," the sheriff declared. "You ain't goin' to waste them brains and that nerve punchin' cows and bustin' broom tails. I'm needin' another deputy, and you're it. How about it, Red?"

Red grinned sheepishly, and his face colored up.

"That's O. K., sheriff," he said. "But I can't sign up for a few days."

"Why, Red?"

"'Cause," Red hesitatingly replied, "I gotta ride to Ellensburg and tell somebody—that is—— Well, there's a little gal there that'll be tickled pink to hear we can git married now."

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HOW TO MAKE A HAIR ROPE

By BOB WILSON

PLENTY of straight-tongued rangers do solemnly asseverate that a rattler will not cross over a hair rope. They will warn you never to sleep out in rattlesnake country without first laying one of these prickly ropes around your bed as a precaution against a sociable diamond-back crawling in to share your blankets.

As many vehemently swear it's a loco notion, maintaining that a snake will slither right over a hair rope and bite you all the harder for having tried to stop it. And they know any number of sad cases where a man who put faith in the fallacy now occupies a "narrow grave just six by three," somewhere out on the "lone praire-e."

It's a touchy subject—this rattlesnake-hair-rope business. And one that will start a good fight any time. So we won't take sides. Instead, we'll take up other uses of the hair rope, which are much less open to dispute.

The *macarte*—to call it by its Mexican name as it is in the West—is a most useful and ornamental addition to any rider's outfit. As a lead rope, or as part of the hackamore equipment, it lends a dash of color that is particularly pleasing to young waddies who are proud of their appearance on horseback. And while it is not designed for heavy roping, and is too soft and light for such work, it can be used as efficiently as any rope for all ordinary purposes. It is especially adaptable as a picket rope, or to lash a pack in place when the weather is wet, for dampness will not cause it to stiffen or kink, and it is impervious to shrinkage.

It is not a difficult matter to make a *macarte*. Almost any handy man, with a few pounds of hair and the materials he can pick up about the place, can spin quite a respectable rope the first try. The only equipment necessary is a spindle, which can be made with a piece of board, a pocketknife, and some sort of an instrument that will bore a one-inch hole.

The board should be about three quarters of an inch in thickness and a foot long. Trim it to the shape of a triangle, about three inches wide at one end and tapering to a point at the other. Then cut a notch around the small end, over

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which to loop the strands of hair for spinning. Now bore a hole as near as possible to the small end of the board. Make a round handle to fit the hole, with a shoulder on one end to keep the board from slipping off. This is probably the most primitive spinning device known to man, but will serve the purpose quite as well as the more complicated machines used by commercial rope manufacturers.

THE most important requisite in the making of a hair rope is, of course, the hair. Any kind of hair will do. Perhaps that from horses' manes is most favored because of its finer, softer texture. Cattle switches are also good. But the tail hair from horses makes a harsh, prickly rope, and is hard to spin.

Round up a band of mustangs—if you live in that kind of country—and trim off their manes—first determining, however, that the horses do not belong to some one who will object to the procedure. A Western lad was arrested last summer for cutting the tails and manes from range horses. It developed that his father—an inmate of State's prison—was making a hair bridle in his idle moments, and had written to his son to supply the material. However, plenty of horses with too much mane are running wild in the range country, and even in other localities a few pounds of hair is not hard to acquire.

The first step is to pick the hair apart, a few hairs at a time, letting it fall in a loose, tangled mass on a canvas or clean space of ground, making separate piles of the different colors.

For the spinning, a helper will be required to operate the spindle by holding the handle and whirling it around. When all is ready, take a strand of a dozen or so hairs and loop them over the notched end of the spindle. The assistant then starts the board to whirling on its handle—backing away as the strand lengthens—while you run an even amount of hair through your fingers, letting the strand twist the hair into itself from the loose pile on the floor; but keeping it an even size by only allowing about the same amount to pass through your fingers. A very little practice will enable any one to spin a smooth, hard, even-sized strand.

Four strands should be spun out in this manner, and pegged down. It is important that the spindle be turned in the same direction for all four strands. Each strand should be approximately three times the length required in the finished rope.

Now two of the strands must be combined. Hook the ends on the spindle, and holding it taut, twist them together tightly. This time the spindle should be turned in the opposite direction from the first. Twist the two remaining strands together in the same manner.

Then, while your assistant holds the centers so the strands will not kink, double them, making four strands again and peg the ends down solidly. Now, separating the strands with your fingers, begin at the spindle and twist the four together, letting the finished rope force your hand along the strands, till you reach the end. This time the spindle should be turned in the opposite direction from the last, or as at first. This is the final step in the making of a *macarte*, and the strands should be twisted together as tight as possible. The finished rope may then be stretched, pegged down and left to set, when it will be ready for use.

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If the different colors of hair are spun into separate strands, the finished rope can be made with either alternate spots, or circular stripes, according to the way the strands are combined. A little study will show just how to combine them for the design you most desire. Some striking color effects can be had by dyeing the hair in different hues. Red and green, combined with the natural white and black, will make a rope to dazzle the eye. Or for a Fourth-of-July celebration, a striped red-white-and-blue hackamore rein would be most appropriate. Anyhow, it won't hurt to jazz up the old outfit a bit, and perhaps your favorite saddle horse will respond with a prouder bow to its neck and a lighter step under the saddle. And then, too, if you happen to live in rattlesnake country—— Hold on, there! Don't shoot!

A Complete Book-length Novel, "FORTUNE HUNTERS," by KENNETH PERKINS, in Next Week's Issue.

OKLAHOMA STARTS A GAME FARM

PLANS are under way in Oklahoma for the establishment of the greatest wild-life institute and game farm in the United States. A historic site, that of the old Cheyenne-Arapahoe Indian agency at Darlington, has been selected for the undertaking.

This season it will propagate bobwhite quail, prairie chicken, California valley quail, scaled quail, and three kinds of pheasants. It will also make a start toward turning out wild mallard ducks. Its ambitious program includes the distribution of eggs to scores of backyard quail raisers, who will later release the birds in Oklahoma's game fields.

The State game and fish department also proposes to use the Darlington farm as a laboratory and experimental station for developing improved methods of upland game propagation.

Located on the banks of the North Canadian River, Darlington's history dates back to the late '60s. Under the Quaker missionary, Brinton Darlington, first regular agent sent to the Cheyennes and Arapahoes, the reservations unsatisfactorily established at Pond Creek and Camp Supply were removed to the big bend in the North Canadian. In the summer of 1870 the government sent out by wagon train the first sawmill seen in western Oklahoma. Native cottonwoods, elms, chittams, and blackjacks were soon turned into frame structures for the agency personnel, for homes, stores, a schoolhouse, and a hotel. Within a few months the settlement became the metropolis of a vast frontier. Various stage lines intersected here, making it a great trade and travel center.

After the death of Brinton Darlington several exciting outbreaks occurred, and the Indian agency was moved to another locality. The property was then purchased by the Masons for an orphanage, which was later moved to Guthrie.

With its new and elaborate State game farm the historic spot will continue its trail-blazing career.

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A Serial

Kingbird's Pursuit

By GEORGE OWEN BAXTER

AFTER eluding the pursuit of a posse led by Marshal Jim Hampton, the young outlaw known as the "Kingbird" learns that the posse was set on his trail by the Ramirez family, his supposed friends. The Kingbird, who has been infatuated with the beautiful Inez Ramirez, then pays a surprise visit to the house of Ramirez, on the outskirts of Valencia. He finds that the family has a guest—a wealthy Spaniard, Don Esteban Cuyas.

Doña Maria, Inez's mother, whose ambition for her daughter to marry the rich Spaniard had led to the betrayal of the Kingbird to the law, sets the armed servants of the house upon the young outlaw. But the honest Don Esteban intervenes. Then Inez, regretful, begs forgiveness of both men, saying that she has had to play a part for each of them, and that she is in love with neither.

After leaving the house of Ramirez, the Kingbird goes to the ranch home of an old friend, a young girl called "Brick," whose real name is Helena Blair. She is away on a trip to town, but he is welcomed by her parents.

The Kingbird learns from John Blair that the young son of James Kinney, a Western millionaire, has

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been kidnaped and is being held for one hundred thousand dollars ransom, which Kinney has refused to pay. Blair remarks that Kinney has now lost both his sons, the older one having run away from home four years before. The rancher notes that the Kingbird seems much concerned about the boy's kidnaping.

They await Brick's return, but, instead, a rider sweeps past the place, leaving a note from the girl, stating that she has secured a job which takes her away from home and about which she can tell them nothing, except that she is well paid.

The Kingbird promises the distressed parents of the girl that he will attempt to find her. Riding his mare, Molly, he goes off in pursuit of the man who left the note—a half-breed, named Dick Macey, whose mount is a famous silver stallion.

The trail leads the Kingbird to the hang-out of a gang of bad men, in an abandoned mine. He overhears several of them speak of some mysterious cache. He holds up one of the men, named Garry, and forces him to lead the way into the mine. Meanwhile, the rest of the gang leave by another exit and then set off dynamite, thus trapping the Kingbird and his captive inside the mine.

They manage to dig their way out, and the Kingbird then parts with Garry. However, he stalks Garry as the fellow goes to rejoin the gang, now located in an old ranch house. Watching the place from a distance, the Kingbird sees Helena Blair as she goes to the pump for water.

That night he crawls in the window of a vacant room in the house, but his entrance is discovered, and he is trapped there. From the other side of the door a strange voice tells the Kingbird to look out the window.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CELLAR.

HE obeyed, and with the sheen of the moonlight working upon her like the gleam of watered silk, he saw Molly standing at the edge of the brush, secured on a long lead.

A groan broke from the lips of the Kingbird, and the man in the next room heard it.

He answered with laughter.

"You see how you're cornered, King?" he asked.

The Kingbird could not help answering: "It looks as though my back's against the wall, partner."

"I'm no partner of yours," said the voice of the stranger. "Know me?"

"No. I don't recognize your voice," said the young man.

"It's too bad, then," said the man in the next room, "that you'll never have a chance to see me. Unless you take the offer that I make to you."

"What's the offer?" asked the Kingbird.

"That you unstrap your guns and come out the front door of the shack backward, with your arms up over your head."

"I don't think I'll do that."

"I don't want you to, very much," said the other. "It's not pleasant thinking, even—what we'd do once we got our hands on you! But I'm making the offer, and making it for the last time. Understand?"

"I understand."

"Only, boy," said the voice beyond the door, lowering, "while you're dying, as you'll be pretty

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soon, I want you to know another thing."

"Fire away," said the Kingbird. "Whatever else happens, your *talk* won't be the death of me."

"Why," said the man behind the door, "I'm one who knows all about you. Everything!"

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"I doubt that, stranger."

"Shall I name your father?"

"Never mind that!" exclaimed the Kingbird.

"I can show you that I know," said the man behind the door. "And just to sweeten up the end for you, I can tell you that you're wrong about your father. He's not the sort of a devil that you think. He's a hard man, but he's fair and straight. He'd be glad to see you back with him. He'd give you a new sort of a break in life."

"*Now* he might." The Kingbird sneered.

"Aye, he'll have no chance," said the stranger. "I'm the one that gets the chance at you."

There was controlled laughter behind the door.

"And the best of it is," said the voice, "that you don't know who I am, and that if you met me on the street, you couldn't blame me at all."

The laughter sounded again.

Then: "Good-by, King. This is the finish for you."

And finally: "Sorry to be rough!"

Then came the shout, at a distance: "Ready! Let it go!"

What were they to let go?

The Kingbird knew in another moment, when he smelled the faint odor of wood smoke and heard, after an instant, a light and busy crackling sound which was, he knew, the noise which the wind makes among dead leaves, or flame in dry wood!

THE instant he heard the fire, he felt certain that he was indeed gone, and then a flood of hysteria came sweeping over him. He wanted to scream out something —that he would accept the offer to surrender, that he wanted a chance to say good-by—to Molly, the mare! Then there were messages which he could beg to send—last statements —speeches—anything to put off, for an instant, the blast of red fire that would be the end of him.

And yet he mastered himself, because he knew that to cry out and implore, now, would be merely to win their laughter! Bitterly he understood it, and dropping again to one knee, he cast wildly about in his mind.

Whatever hope there might be, there was none for him in this room.

He went to the inner door and shattered the lock with a bullet. He pushed the door open, hearing a shout many times repeated that answered his gunshot outside the house.

The next room was a long affair with the wreck of a big table in the center. It had been the dining room in the habitable days of that house. Now it was faintly lighted by a shaft of moonlight that sank into it from two windows on the side, and by a red gleam and dance of flame from the room beyond.

He stood in that doorway. It was the kitchen, and the fire had been started in two corners of it.

At one side, the flames were already tapping their fingers against the ceiling. On the other side, they had chosen to spread out, and were eating a good-sized hole through the boards of the wall. Once through, and the wind giving a draft to help, the whole house would soon be afire!

There was no way to go from

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this kitchen except down into the cellar, whose door opened at the side of the kitchen floor.

He jerked back the narrow panel and looked down.

It was a shallow, small place. There was sufficient fire to show its utmost limits to him. Across the top of it ran the beams that supported the floor of the house; the bottom and the walls were simply earth, and parts of the side walls had fallen in. There was no sign of what it had been used for, except as a tool shed, perhaps. For there was the head of a sledge hammer, and a broken pitchfork, and a shovel with part of the handle adhering to it.

The sight of the shovel gave him an idea which contained some hope.

He was up the stone steps of the cellar in a flash, and wrenched the cellar door and the kitchen door off their hinges. These he carried down, and leaning them against the cellar wall, they formed a narrow lean-to that would afford shelter to one human body.

On these doors, placed side by side, he began frantically shoveling the loose earth that lay on the floor of the cellar. Feverishly he worked and heaped the moist soil completely over one of the open ends, and well up on the side, until it reached the top. And still he shoveled frantically.

Earth will not burn, at least, and unless the heat was great enough to stifle him, he might be able to endure the bitter moment until the flimsy house had burned over his head, and the red coals were at last cooling.

As he plied the shovel, he heard the fire roaring like a storm above him, and a fiercer and a redder light fell upon him.

With a great groaning, the kitchen roof parted. Half of it fell, and a shower of burning wood dropped into the cellar. That was what drove him, finally, into his place of last resort, even before he was really ready to get into it. Inside it, he worked on with the shovel, eagerly, but with small strokes, heaping up the earth which he had previously shoveled opposite the open end. He had to work with the shovel inside to dig out more soil, until he finally managed to heap up the wall to the top.

Now he lay flat, and waited.

The waiting was the worst of all.

Fresh uproar began, and then continued steadily, and as the big timbers of the building fell, he knew that the climax was coming for him.

THE heat was not great, at first, as he lay on the moist ground, with the protection above him, but when the fire had thoroughly baked the ground that was heaped on top of the doors, then the rank smell of the heated wood choked him, and the heat above him was so great that he seemed to be breathing fire.

He reached up and found the doors hot, and growing hotter.

He had to lie flat on his face, and part his lips, and hold them close to the ground, which alone remained cool.

Every moment he told himself that the end had come and that he would not be able to endure another moment for the lack of fresh oxygen.

Hysteria almost mastered him a dozen times, and it was then that he remembered having heard of the Hindu fakirs who permit themselves to be buried alive, and remain in the ground for more than a day. They, to be sure, were able to manage with little or no air admitted. He thought of them, and of the iron

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resolution which enables them to endure the test, without going mad.

So would he endure, and not allow imagination to add to his trouble.

And that trouble was great, and growing greater. He heard the fall of the timbers. Certainly if a considerable portion of them fell into the cellar and burned there, they would turn it into an oven, and he could endure only a few moments. But luck was favoring him in that respect, at least. Then he heard more distant sounds than the crackling of the breaking rafters.

They were firing off guns. He could swear that he heard the bullets strike among the flaming ruins of the place. And, more than this, he could hear the loud yelling, the repeated cheers.

What manner of men were they, when they cheered the burning of a man alive?

Or did they imagine that the gunshot which shattered the lock of a door had been through his own brain, forestalling the death by fire?

That yelling continued, and while it lasted, he found that he hardly felt the terrible torment of the heat.

But afterward, it began again, until the end of a falling timber butted straight through his flimsy partition, and a cloud of smoke and the red blast of the furnace were let in against his face!

He kicked out the last wall that he had filled in. Before him and above him was only the remnant of the bonfire; the majority of the damage had been done, and there was the narrow flight of the cellar steps.

He was up them, running like a scorched cat, with the flames leaping at him, and biting him like red snakes.

Out he darted into the open, before one of those terrible, impalpable heads could wholly fasten upon him. The pain forced him to throw himself on the ground, where he rolled, waiting for the barking of the guns that would kill him more mercifully.

But no guns sounded!

They were waiting for him to rise, so that they might howl with laughter for an instant at his antics, and then load him with bullets!

NO, when he leaped to his feet, not a rifle or revolver sounded. He reached the line of the brush, and there, dropping to his knee, gasping, wondering when the fire would leave his burning lungs, he made sure that the enemy had actually passed on!

That was what the discharge of guns and the yellings had meant, no doubt. They simply had waited until the flames raked the house fore and aft, and then they had cheered, and departed.

What was the girl thinking, he wondered, while these things went on? What were her reactions to the burning of an old friend alive?

He pondered this grimly, and then stood up. They were not very far away, and now they had on their trail one who might do more to them than they had hoped the flames would do to him!

In the vastnuess of his anger, his mind grew calm and cool, and with clear-eyed reflection he considered them all—considered the girl, even, and took the sombrero which he had carried twisted like a rag around his belt, and shook it out before his eyes, and laughed a little.

It had been something like a flag—and something of a joke, too—that battered old sombrero. He looked at it now, threw it on the ground, and kicked it from him.

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But when he started walking, he picked it up again, and tied it to his belt.

A man could do various things with it—soak it in oil, and light it, and hold it like a torch under the chin of one of those fellows who had tried to cremate him. That was one pleasant possibility that occurred to him.

There were other things that could be done.

But before he attempted much of anything, he must have food.

He had gone too long without a meal. His weakness was not entirely the effect of the great heat that had baked him and the nerve shocks that he had sustained; more than all else, there was the vitiating effect of a three-day fast.

Yet he stuck to the trail at an easy trot. He could not afford to lose time, he could not risk missing their trail.

He ran on for an hour, with an occasional stagger. Their sign was clear before him. They were making no effort at speed, and at the end of the hour, he saw two riders straggling to the rear, and one of these was the long, gaunt form of Garry, foolishly perched on that trim little beauty, Molly!

The Kingbird looked with red-stained eyes.

But he would not seek revenge on Garry particularly—they were all due for killing, they were all worthy to die by the fire they had condemned him to. He would not cherish any special hatreds, not even for Garry, whom he had seen through the long peril of the mine. Garry would go down with the rest, when the chosen time came!

He began to breathe more easily. He forgot his weakness, and the hunger pains that were beginning to work in his stomach.

So he followed that trail patiently all the rest of the night, sometimes working on with his head down, half sick, half giddy, but always persisting steadily.

He saw the sun rise. It seemed to push suddenly up above the horizon and stare at him, angrily. Then, through the woods, he saw that the gang was heading in an easy detour around a small village.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DEPUTY.

THE Kingbird surrendered to the demands of that weaker creature, his inner man. He left the trail of the party, and went straight into the town.

It was one of those wretched little mountain places which grow for a time, and then sink back into despair, as it were, and sometimes revive, and sometimes fall into nothingness.

A single street curved in a crooked arc around the base of a mountain. Down that mountainside tumbled a creek that cut straight across the town, and was spanned by a narrow bridge that was once strong enough to hold up a whole freighting outfit, but that now shook and groaned treacherously under a single horseman.

Two thirds of the houses were broken-down and vacant, and the others had an air of approaching ruin. Yet the little place had had an ambition, one day, and still there was a stone arch across the road with a legend on the face of it which read:

"Watch us grow. Elmira, the queen of the Rockies!"

"Elmira, the queen of the Rockies," had not grown very long. And yet there was no reason why it should not. There was plenty of

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cultivable soil in the valley, and there might have been twenty times as many ranch houses as ever had been stretched down the length of it. But a whim of fancy or a freak of bad times is enough to discourage an entire community. The calamities of a banking crisis may all be attributed by a farming community to the bad condition of the land.

Some such unlucky state of mind had come over the people of the Elmira Valley. They had pulled up stakes and left good grass, good water, and plenty of fertile ground. Another wave of settlers would one day find it, a branch railroad line would be built to it, and it would become a permanently established member of the group of mountain towns.

It was not hard for the Kingbird to envisage all of these changes, but in the meantime, he would have been glad if it had been even a tenth of its present size, so long as he was able to find a place to buy cooked food.

He found it in what was left of the Elmira Hotel. One wing of that building had fallen in, and had mostly been used as firewood. The other wing was resting on uncertain knees, and to the dining room one approached over a veranda whose boards sagged with sad noises underfoot.

There was no waiter. There was only, at this time of day, the cook. And the cook was now sitting on the veranda, peeling potatoes. Elmira breakfasted at an early hour, and the cook did not propose to get up and hobble about on his wooden leg to prepare a meal for a single guest.

He said, in answer to the inquiry: "Sure, this is the hotel, and this here is the dinin' room. You're late for breakfast, and you're mighty early for lunch, if you was to ask me! Whatcha wanta eat?"

The Kingbird considered.

"An old rind of a yellow cheese would be a fine thing for me," he said. "And a couple of crusts of moldy bread would be about the best thing I ever saw, and then a fine glass of sour milk would finish off a good meal for me."

The cook laughed

"That's what you *would* eat, eh?" said he.

"Yes. That's what I'd eat. I hope you're not all out of those things?"

"I asked you what you *wanta* eat?" said the cook.

He rolled himself in his chair a little, and poised his peeling knife in a fat hand.

The Kingbird was willing to gratify this expectancy.

"Why," he said, "I wouldn't mind starting with the ribs of a steer, barbecued brown—and they wouldn't have to be so barbecued, either, as a matter of fact."

"Just the ribs of *one* steer?" The cook grinned.

"Yes. And a few loin steaks left on the ribs for a decoration. Then I could follow on with a dozen eggs."

"Nice fresh eggs, eh?"

"They don't have to be so fresh, either," said the young man. "I wouldn't quarrel with any sort of an egg, myself!"

The cook laughed again.

"What else?" he asked.

"You could follow up the eggs," said the Kingbird, "with forty or fifty nice thick flapjacks, the kind that mother used to make, and a couple of quarts of maple sirup to trim them up. And after that, I'd take on just one turkey. Just one nice, big, fat turkey. Just one forty-pound turkey, with the stuffing and

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the cranberry sauce, and all that. And I'd need no more than a gallon or two of coffee, and perhaps along toward the finish I might ease off on three or four deep-dish apple pies. Or pumpkin pies, for that matter. I'm not particular."

"You're kind of holler, kid, are you?" asked the cook.

"Hollow?" said the Kingbird. "If you dropped a stone into my mouth, you'd have to listen for thirty seconds before it hit bottom."

The cook rose, grinning.

"All right, son," said he. "You come back into the dining room, and I'll warm up that stove and see what it can do for you."

"I'll go as far as I can pay," said the Kingbird.

"Pay?" said the cook. "It ain't a question of payin' when there's a hungry man around. Thank Heaven, we're far enough West for that! You come back and lay into a chair, and I'll do some cookin'. It's a long time since I cooked any for a gent that really needed food!"

HE led the way, stumping with his wooden leg over the doorsill, and back through the shadows of the long, dreary dining room. Thin, stale odors of old cookery hung in the air, and to the Kingbird seemed delightful fragrances.

"Two eggs and five strips of bacon and a chunk of bread will be about my measure, partner, and a couple of cups of coffee," he said.

The cook whirled around on his wooden stump, a turn so rapid that he almost lost his balance.

"Hey, are you a false alarm?" he demanded.

"Look," said the young man. "I haven't eaten much for two or three days."

The other whistled.

"Then you've got to go slow. You don't look weak, though."

"I haven't had time to ask myself whether I'm weak or not," answered the Kingbird.

He sat at a table, and presently he heard the hissing of the bacon in the frying pan, and the odor of coffee stole out from the kitchen to enchant him. A drowsy contentment came over him.

Somewhere in the world there was a place where men did nothing but sleep and eat, and that was the place that he wished to find!

A man came into the doorway, a fellow of somewhat less than average size, with blond hair that had a golden gleam to it, and a thin, handsome face.

He paused mid-stride, with his hand still on the edge of the door, then turned swiftly about and left the place. He went with his head a trifle down, taking great steps.

"Does he know—me?" asked the Kingbird of himself.

He hardly cared. He could forget now that he was the Kingbird, with a price on his head. There was nothing this side of eternity that mattered very much to him except the scent of the food that was being cooked in the kitchen.

The cook called out: "Hey, come and get it, kid!"

He went in to find a great tray heaped with food. There was more than the original order. There was a big dish of stewed fruit, and a vast wedge of gingerbread, and other delicacies.

"There ain't much trimmings left in the pantry now," said the cook, "but you go in and start on this!"

The young man returned with his cargo to the dining room, and ate, not hurriedly, but slowly, with small bites, masticating everything thoroughly, though it seemed to him

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that there was no pleasure left, except that of bolting everything whole.

He knew what grim effects that sort of a procedure might have, however. Leisurely he worked at the eggs and bacon and the bread, and sipped the strong coffee, and vast comfort, and strength, and the need of sleep invaded him.

The screen door was pushed open, and closed with a jangle, and the clank and rattle of spurs came back toward him.

A big man with his right sleeve rolled up over a brawny forearm laid a fist on the table, and in the fist was a .45-caliber Colt, with a shop-made and a home-worn look about it.

"Stick your hands up, Kingbird," said he. "You're mine!"

"Wait'll I finish this chuck," said the Kingbird. "Then I'll throw my hands up."

"You fool," said the other. "I'm a deputy sheriff. And I've got you. I mean business. Hoist your hands!"

"Go chase yourself," said the Kingbird. "I'm hungry."

"Are you crazy?" asked the other.

"Wait'll I finish breakfast," said the young man, "and you can take me to jail, fast enough, but what makes you drunk enough to think that I'm the Kingbird?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

OUTWITTED LAWMAN.

THE gun quivered in the powerful hand of the deputy sheriff. "I like to hear you talk, boy," said he. "But if you don't hoist your hands——"

"Oh, quit it," said the Kingbird with irritation. "If I'm the Kingbird, go ahead and take the flock of guns off me, while I finish eating. You can't spoil my appetite."

"I can with one slug out of this gun, kid, and you're sure goin' to get it!"

"I'd as soon die as be so hungry," said the young man. "What's the matter with you, anyway? Didn't you ever see the Kingbird?"

"I'm seeing him now!"

"Not half of him." The outlaw chuckled. "Would the Kingbird let any mug of a sheriff walk up on him like this? Say, what's the brand of redeye that they serve out around here? Sit down, brother, and tell me all about it, but don't make a fool of yourself and talk about the Kingbird!"

"It's a good bluff," said the other. "I don't mind saying that. I'm going to count to three and then——"

"Hold on," said the young man. "Now I *see!* Oh, the low hound. Now I see the whole thing."

He put back his head and chuckled, then laughed outright.

"You see what?" asked the deputy sheriff.

"I see where you picked up the good news about the Kingbird being in town!"

"Go on with your little song and dance for a minute," said the other. "But I'm watchin' your hands all the while, kid!"

"Go ahead and watch 'em!" remarked the Kingbird. "I'll tell you who gave you the good news. Fellow with yellow hair, sort of sleek and shining, and a thin face—rather handsome, eh?"

"What of it?" asked the deputy sheriff.

The Kingbird made a sandwich, using the last of the crisped bacon. Slowly he munched the first large mouthful until he was able to speak.

"Think of that bird crooking me like *that!*" said he. "Is he still around town?"

"I dunno. I suppose so."

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"No, he's gone on through," said the young man, "and all that he does is to leave word with you that you're to look out for the Kingbird, and then he describes me. Is that it?"

"He told me that you're in here, and he's right. I don't need no description of the Kingbird. I been readin' them for four years!"

"Descriptions that said I was his size?" asked the Kingbird, frowning.

"Yeah, just about."

"Why, I've seen him," said the young man. "He's three inches taller."

"Yeah?"

"About that. Heavier, too. Why, how could I be the Kingbird, I'd like to know?"

"I dunno, but you are. You're cool, too. You're cool enough to be the Kingbird."

"I'd be the Kingbird to that sneak of a low-down hound," said the young man. "I've been following him clear across the mountains, till my broncho broke down, up the valley."

He added: "Wait a minute!"

"I'm waiting, and I'm watching, too, son," said the deputy sheriff.

"Keep on waiting and watching, then, but tell me this: Doesn't the Kingbird always travel with his black mare, Molly?"

The deputy blinked. It was plain that this detail hit him hard.

"Well, maybe he does," said he. "But the mare might be cached outside of the town, somewhere."

"You mean that me—as the Kingbird—me—I'd walk into a town like this, and sit down in broad daylight, and order up a meal, and sit right here, and eat it?" asked the young man.

"The Kingbird has all the nerve in the world. He might do that," declared the deputy sheriff.

THE Kingbird laughed. "That's pretty good," said he. "That's rich, in fact. I never heard anything richer. Why, the whole country's looking for him, since he dodged the marshal! Would he be fool enough to act like this?"

"Any man that can beat Jim Hampton three times is bright enough to do all kinds of things," argued the deputy, rather vaguely.

"All right," said the Kingbird suddenly. "I'm the Kingbird, am I?"

"You sure are!"

"Then search me!" said the young man.

He threw out his hands.

"Come along and search me, and find the guns," he demanded. "Go on and do it! If I'm the Kingbird, I'm traveling heeled, I suppose? Now, you come and find the guns!"

The deputy drew in a breath.

"Ain't you got any guns on you, kid?"—he asked.

"I did have," said the young man. "You'll find a broken Colt back there under a bluff. That used to be a good gun. I was going to use that, pumping lead into that sneak with the blond hair and the thin face—the one that told you about the Kingbird being in here!"

He laughed again.

"I wouldn't mind a rest in a jail for a few days," he said. "I can't catch him while I'm on foot, and I haven't enough money to buy a decent horse, here in town."

"What's his name?" asked the deputy, giving up most of his hope.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No. Blondy is all I know for him. And he's a blond beauty when it comes to dealing poker hands that are framed. He trimmed me. I had a roll that was worth handling, before I met that crook."

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"Did you?"

"He cleaned me out. I've got chicken feed left, and not much else. But I'll get him, some day. I've got him scared already. Think of him telling you that I'm the Kingbird! He's scared enough to want to get me off his trail!"

The deputy sheriff nodded.

"He's kind of excited, all right. He was all out of breath when he found me!" He added: "What *is* your name, kid?"

"Why, I'm the Kingbird," the young man said, and laughed.

The deputy sheriff laughed in turn, and, putting up his gun, he slid down in his chair a little, and made himself comfortable.

"Well," he said, "I thought for a minute that I was going to be either dead or famous, to-day. That's the luck of it. You don't have no luck, when you're living in a place like this, away off at the end of nowhere."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"For a minute," he said, "I kind of thought that you was the Kingbird, all right. But I guess I was crazy. I can see that you ain't his size. You got the color, though—the hair and the eyes."

"What would the Kingbird say if he knew I was arrested for him?" The young man chuckled. "But look here, if you want a job, what about going out and picking up that hound of a Blondy?"

"What charge?" asked the deputy, frowning.

"Crooked cards!"

"Crooked cards?" said the deputy. "That don't get you nowhere, brother. The judge and the jury, they always get to laughing. You can't do nothing when you pinch a gambler. I've seen it tried, a lot of times. They're always too slick, and the evidence ain't ever worth nothing. There's only one way to deal with 'em."

"What's that?"

"Deal with a gun, when you catch a crook at the table!"

"You mean, start in shooting?"

"That's the trick."

"I tried it," said the Kingbird, "but he was out the door before I had my gun ready."

The deputy chuckled.

"You're not one of these lightning artists on the draw, eh?" said he.

He rose.

"I'm not lightning. Not quite," said the Kingbird.

"Well, good-by," said the deputy. "I wouldn't mind handling that thug for pulling my leg this way, at that! The Kingbird! He seemed all heated up. He was panting, I tell you. Dog-gone him, he certainly had me fooled!"

"So long," said the Kingbird. "Better luck next time. But I wouldn't wait for the Kingbird to throw up his hands, as you did. I'd kill him first, and ask him the questions later on."

"*You'd* 'a' been out of luck if I'd done that," said the deputy sheriff.

"Yes, I'd have been out of luck," said the Kingbird. "So long."

HE watched the other stride from the place, open the door, hesitate for a moment, and then with a shrug of his big shoulders go slowly down the street to the right.

The Kingbird made himself a cigarette, and smoked it as he sipped his second cup of coffee.

He was beginning to feel foolish, between sleepiness and happiness. And as he smoked, he pondered the way before him.

How far off were the men who carried with them the girl—and black Molly?

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His mind would not stay on the thought of Brick. She might have protested against the butchery of her old friend. Her voice might have been raised, no matter how vainly. But there had not been a sound from her!

The fellow with the blond hair, he surmised, might be he whose voice had laughed at him through the door; he who had offered him life if he would back out of the house with his arms stretched high above his head. If so, he was the controlling spirit. And he knew a great deal. He had said he could name the father of the Kingbird!

All sleep, and all happiness, left the body of the young man. His brain cleared. And now he began to remember, more clearly, what his weary eyes had seen through the trees, when the riders turned, and began their detour around the town. Two of those horses had empty saddles, and bore between them what looked like a litter made with a pair of long saplings, and a blanketed form lay in the center of the litter.

He had been dim-eyed, dim-witted, when he saw the procession, or he would have taken keener heed of the details. Perhaps that litter contained the heart of the entire mystery.

He went into the kitchen.

"What's the bill, doctor?" he asked.

"Fifty cents," said the cook, who was slicing potatoes, and standing at the sink.

He did not turn his head.

"Here's a dollar, and thanks," said the Kingbird.

"The fifty cents is all I want," said the cook.

"Give the other fifty cents to the first tramp that comes along. Give it in the same sort of a meal," said the young man, surprised.

"No," said the cook, still without turning. "I don't handle that kind of money."

"Hello!" exclaimed the young man, amazed.

The cook gradually turned. His round, fat face was dark—darker even than its growth of beard warranted.

"What sort of money?" asked the Kingbird.

"Crooked money," said the cook.

"Oh, you heard the deputy talking, in there?"

"I heard you make a fool of him," said the cook.

The Kingbird was silent, and the other went on:

"I wouldn't break in and tell him what kind of a fool he was. I ain't the sort that would wanta cause the hangin' of any man. But I don't want none of your money. And I don't want none of you, you gun-handlin' crook. Murderer is what you are, and all your kind. Get out of this here kitchen, and stay out. I'd be walkin' on two legs, if it wasn't for one like you!"

"I'm sorry, doctor," said the Kingbird slowly. "I'm *mighty* sorry. You won't be shaking hands either, I suppose?"

"No," said the cook. "I'd rather be hanged myself than shake hands with one of your kind. But I'll wish you luck. Dog-gone me, I dunno why, but I'll wish you good luck to keep your worthless neck safe!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT THE FORD.

HE bought a bay mustang gelding for seventy-five dollars. It was not a pretty horse, and had a lump of a head and a slightly roached back, and the gait of a draft horse. But it had

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a stretching gallop, and a long, rolling canter, and it had all the signs of a horse that can "stay." That was what he wanted.

He got a cheap saddle, and an old bridle, and rode straightway out of the town.

Off to the left he cut from Elmira, and keeping the mustang to a round pace all the time, he came to the rolling country beyond, the foothills which flowed like green waves across the feet of the mountains.

There he struck sign that seemed to him indubitably that of the party he wanted, and presently, sure enough, he made out the big, rounded imprints that could hardly belong to any horse other than the gray stallion. He kept to the same rate of going, therefore, and pressed on, his eyes sharpened as he glanced into the thickets, or examined the rocks that rose in nests on either hand.

They must have halted when the blond fellow with the thin face rode into Elmira, on whatever errand. Naturally they had been in no haste—when they were confident that he had been burned in the old ranch house. And now word must have been brought out to them—and not very long before his coming, at that.

Well, their speed would be that of the slowest member of the party. Perhaps their speed would be that of the horse litter! And in that case, he would surely find them—unless they found him first, with a bullet through the brain!

And if a cold and steady hatred was working in him, he could well imagine the frenzy of astonishment and of rage that must be in the others.

He followed the sign down the side of a steep-banked creek. It was by no means fordable in any place that he came to, and he had an idea that when it was passable, the whole troop might cross to the farther side. A very small rear guard would there hold him back, while the others swept away and established a good lead.

He was prepared for that, and following the clear trail through the grass, when something moved in the grove across the creek, and he covered the spot with a revolver instantly. He had his two guns, still. A lucky thing that the deputy sheriff had not called his bluff and searched him for his weapons.

As he whipped out the gun, the clear voice of Helena Blair cried out:

"Don't shoot, King! It's I!"

She came riding her own pinto pony through the grove, and into the open.

Such a shock of pleasure ran through him that he forgot all about his former fears and doubts of her good faith.

She waved her hand to him and rode down to the edge of the creek bank.

"Hello, Brick," he called to her. "Great Scott, this is good! Where's the ford? I'll be with you in a minute."

"Listen to me, King," called the girl in answer. "If you come over, you're not to try to take me away with you."

"I'm not what?"

"You're not to try to take me. I want to talk to you and explain things. You've got to give me your word you won't force me to go back with you now."

He ground his teeth.

"Brick, are you crazy?" he yelled back at her.

"You promise?" she asked him. "Otherwise, I've got to cut away

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through the woods, and clear out. Will you promise?"

He groaned.

"I'll promise!" he answered.

"You stay on that side," she said. "I'll come over to you."

SHE rode down the bank, and he followed her until, fifty yards from the start, the bank suddenly sloped away at an easy angle, and she ran the pinto down the sweep of it, and up the farther side to meet him.

He dropped from his horse and shook hands with her as she came up and swung down to the ground like an agile cow-puncher.

She looked a little thinner. There were distinct shadows about her eyes. But she was not very greatly changed. It seemed to him that a year had passed for him, since he last saw her; but for her, it had been only a few moments.

She glanced back over her shoulder, exclaiming: "Let's get to cover, King. You've been riding along in the open so that anybody with half an eye could pick you off. D'you think that they're not ready to kill you any way they can?"

"Not after last night," said he.

He followed her behind a big rock shoulder that heaved above the ground.

And there she caught his hands again and looked eagerly up into his face, and then stepped back, and surveyed him.

"King, you've been through the mill. You look like it!"

He glanced down at himself.

He had been sufficiently ragged to attract wonder and pity even in the town of Elmira. Whether in the mine or in the burning house, his clothes had been torn and singed until they were mere rags, hanging about him.

"I've been through the mill," he admitted.

"And your face, King!" she exclaimed. "You look ten years older. And you're thin."

"*You're* fit enough," he answered her. "Things don't seem to have borne down very hard on you."

She winced.

"We're not to talk about me, much," she said. "It's you, and what you have to do, King."

"What have I to do?"

"Leave this trail."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. Not quite all. The mare will be returned to you. They'll send the mare back, and leave her where you can find her."

"Thanks," said he.

"You see how it is, King?" said she. "They'll do what they can to get you off the trail. They don't want any more trouble with you. You know, they could post men along the way, and nine chances out of ten pick you off."

"They might try that," he said.

"You'll take their offer then?" she pleaded.

"I can't," said he.

"Why can't you?"

"That would be breaking a promise."

"Promise? What promise?"

"That I'd bring you home. I told your father and mother that I would."

She caught her breath.

"Was it terrible for them? Were you there?" she asked.

"Yes, I was there. It was terrible, all right."

"Will you let me explain?" she asked.

"That would be in order," said he.

"I had to come," she answered. "It was a chance to make some money, and we had to have it at home."

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"Just turning an honest penny, eh?" said he.

"I didn't know who they were or what they were like, or what the work would be, really," said she. "I only knew that there was a sick person, and that I would have to go in secret. I could guess by that, that it was not exactly inside the law. I didn't know everything."

"Didn't you?"

"No. Are you doubting me, King?"

"No, go ahead. What are you? The doctor for that gang?"

"Yes. Not for the gang, for the sick—you know, don't you?"

"Who's sick?"

"Yes. You know who it is, don't you? That's the chief reason that you're following, isn't it?"

HE shook his head. "I saw the litter this morning for the first time. I don't know who it is. I'm following because of you," he told her.

She shook her head violently. "That's no good, King," said she. "I'm terribly sorry—I can't go back with you, though. I wouldn't go. It would be deserting him."

"It's a man of course, that's sick? You're pretty devoted to him?" asked the Kingbird.

"He's the most wonderful——" she began.

His face pinched, as she stopped short.

"The most wonderful crook in the world, eh?" said he.

"He's not a crook!" exclaimed the girl.

"No? Just *happens* to be traveling with that gang of murderers?"

"Why, he's the most innocent ——" she began. Then she stopped again, and exclaimed hurriedly: "But I can't tell you a word more than you know already. I've sworn that I won't. That's the only reason that they would let me come back to you, King! They're a pretty savage lot, and they're going mad because you've stuck to the trail so long."

"I'm sorry about that," said he. "I'd like to see 'em all, and tell 'em how sorry I am about it!"

She sighed, still, as always, studying his face.

"You're killing yourself, King," she told him. "You're simply killing yourself."

"Don't bother about me," said the young man. "If I had a grain of sense and resolution in me, I'd take you now, and tie you to your horse, and drag you all the way back home to Valencia. But I'm fool enough to stick to my word. Only—Brick, what's your excuse for breaking the heart of your mother? Your father's smashed by this, too. But your mother's not strong. She's not made to hold up against your little tricks, you know!"

He took a savage pleasure in seeing her wince.

"If I could only explain!" she breathed.

"Yes, if you only could!" He sneered. "The wonderful fellow, the innocent fellow in that litter, I suppose that he's not part of the explanation? How much d'you love him, Brick?"

"I *do* love him," said the girl. "Only——"

"You love him," said the Kingbird, and turned white. "I might have guessed anything else, but I didn't think that you'd lose your head about—I mean, not as quickly as that."

"But don't you understand?" she cried. "He's only——"

"Only an innocent, eh?" said the Kingbird. "What is it? A bullet wound, or several of 'em?"

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"It's a bullet wound, but——"

"Quit it, Brick," said he. "You make me a little sick. I've been thinking a lot about you, on this trail. Now I know why you didn't make any fuss back there when they started to burn me out. It was because you didn't care. You wanted me off the trail and out of the way—even if it was burning alive for me. Was that it?"

AT that, she started off from him, and stared. "What do you mean by that, King?" she asked. "What do you mean by burning you out—burning you alive?"

"Just that," he told her. "That's what I mean. Are you saying that you don't know that they had me back there in the old wreck of a ranch house?"

"They had you there long enough for the rest of us to get away again," said the girl. "But burning—what do you mean by that?"

"Look!" said he.

He indicated his singed clothes. Half of an eyebrow was gone and represented by a red blister; his eyelashes were white at the tips, and most of them were gone, also. Some of his hair had shriveled.

"When the house started burning, they held me in it with their guns. I got down into the little hole in the ground that served as a cellar, and heaped earth over a pair of doors, and lay there in the dugout, stifling, while the worst of the fire burned over. It was a narrow thing in the end, for me—after the timbers broke down my shelter. But somehow or another I managed to get out."

He looked narrowly at her.

"You didn't know that they'd burned me out?"

"No," said the girl.

"You didn't see the smoke and the flames?"

"We were deep in the woods. King, what are you thinking about? That I'd stand and watch such a thing without losing my wits?"

"It's all right, Brick," said he. "You don't have to lie to me. I can stand it, I suppose. But I thought that you and I were hand in glove. I thought we were partners. But I can imagine how it is, after you've lost your heart to a man; old friendships disappear then. They don't matter at all!"

"Lost my heart? To what man?"

Suddenly she threw her hands up against her face.

"I'm going mad, King!" she cried. "I could put you right in three words. He's only—— But I can't say it. I've sworn not to say it!"

"He's only a jailbird—an outlaw, perhaps, like me?" said the Kingbird. "Well, it doesn't matter. We've had our chat. You can go back to 'em, and I'll give you a half-hour start. That's a fair chance, I guess? And then I'm coming after you. You understand? It won't be a matter of parleying and talking then. I'll take you if I have to tie you like a calf, and I'll carry you back to your father and mother. That's what I promised to do. And after that, you can run away again as fast as you please. I'll wash my hands of the business."

His lips were a little stiff with scorn and disgust, and there was a cold agony in him, too, unlike anything that he ever had known before.

She was shaking her head and looking at him with a mournful despair.

"Everything's all tangled up. There's nothing that I can do to put it straight," said the girl. "You won't even believe me. Not if I

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swear, and cross my heart to die. But if you keep on the trail, you'll do a terrible wrong! You'll be the cause of a death, King, that'll wring your heart. And if he dies," she broke out, in a higher tone, "I'll never forgive you! Never, never!"

"We'd better say so long, remarked the Kingbird grimly.

"I can't," said the girl. "My brain's spinning. I've got to say something to stop you. I can't let you ride on this trail. It's murder. That's what it is! They'll kill him. The poor——"

She beat her hands together.

"King," she screamed, "will you trust me, and believe in me?"

"No," he answered. "Not a word that you'd say to me. I wouldn't trust you because I couldn't. You've fallen in love with your wounded hero. That's all right. You're going to lay down your life for him, if you have to. That's all right, too. I don't mind that. Only I'm going to live up to the job that I've taken. I'm going to take you back home with me, Brick. Now go on back to 'em."

He added savagely: "I couldn't know how much I used to think of you except by the way that I despise you now, Brick. Go on, and get back to 'em. And tell 'em that they haven't been able to bury me alive or burn me out, and the next chance will be *my* chance—and Heaven help 'em!"

He ground his teeth as he spoke, and the girl, turning suddenly away, flung herself into the saddle on the pinto, and rode off slowly. Her head was down. Her shoulders heaved. He could not be sure whether she were laughing to herself, or sobbing.

Laughing seemed the more probable answer.

"Women," said the Kingbird to himself. "Women, they're no good. They're no good at all. They're sneaks!"

He saw her cross the creek, and watched her horse fade into the brush, and as she disappeared, a rifle shot rang from the covert, and a bullet touched the tip of his ear with a wasp sting.

A sort of madness came over the Kingbird, as he ducked back behind the rock.

Even his old companion, even Brick, could stoop to such a point, and act as a decoy for a gang of crafty murderers, who had no shame in their make-up. There was no honor in her, then—no honesty, no faith!

He was sick at heart; and then all the fury in him burned up. But he had given his word that he would allow her a half-hour start, and to that word he would cling.

CHAPTER XXV.

JAMES KINNEY.

THAT half-hour start that he allowed her cost him the loss of the trail. Of course the others had been forging steadily ahead all of the time that she held up his pursuit. And when he followed the sign through the grassy lowlands, through the thickets, he came in a single mile to a barren, rocky region where almost all sign disappeared. Every quarter of a mile, a new ravine opened its mouth among the hills. He took a central point, and for three days he lived on toasted rabbit meat, and cut for sign, widening and widening his circle.

Then he gave it up—not permanently, but because he saw that they might be a hundred miles away from him, by this time. It was better to retire, and then try to make a fresh

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start, rather than muddle away all summer on the old lines.

So he went back to Elmira, a short distance from the place where he had started riding in circles, day by day. His mustang was worn out. Its shoes were in rags of metal. It limped in three legs; and he had to walk all that journey back. A settled rage was in him; a settled frown was on his forehead. It was the question of the girl that ceaselessly tormented him, and, above all, whether she had been laughing or weeping, when she rode away from him, three days before.

Just out of Elmira, where the creek's currents were stilled in a big pool, he stopped to drink, and the quiet water showed him his face clearly. It was a picture that startled him, for the old Kingbird had disappeared, and this was one with a new head, and ragged feathers.

His face was overgrown with a ragged brown beard; his eyes were sunk deeply; the frown resided continually between his brows, and even the masking beard could not hide the sense of lines which were worked into his face.

Yes, he looked older, ten years older. Even the caustic tongue of Brick could no longer call him a "pretty boy."

He was bitterly glad of that, and he walked into Elmira in the evening of that day with a perfect confidence that he would not be known even to an enemy as old and familiar with him as Jim Hampton.

Before he was a block down the street, the deputy sheriff went by on a mustang, leading a pack mule, and halted after two looks at the young man.

"Hey, hullo!" said he.

"Hello," said the Kingbird, halting. "How's things?"

"Pretty good," said the deputy. "We got some new men in town, partner. There's one of 'em who'll be glad to see the Kingbird!"

He laughed loudly, as he used the name, and he added, at once: "Funny thing that I ever could 'a' taken you to be the Kingbird. I *wanted* to think so. That was all."

"That was the way of it," agreed the young man. "Know anybody around here with a couple of good horses to sell?"

"Try Milligan, down at the end of town. He's got some pretty good mustangs. They ain't much to see, but they're real mountain hosses."

"Who's in town that wants to see the Kingbird?" asked the young man.

"By name of Kinney," said the deputy.

"Kinney?"

"Yeah. Him that had his son kidnaped. He's got an idea that the crooks are up around here, somewheres."

"Has he?"

"Yeah. I guess he's wrong, but that's his idea. He says that this here is a perfect lay for crooks—a real hole-in-the-wall country, and he's kind of right, at that."

"If he really wants his son back, he can pay the cash," said the young man.

"Sure he can, but he ain't that kind. I think he'd hire the Kingbird to go on the trail, though."

"You think he would?"

"Yeah. He likely would. Why else would he be wanting to see him? He's advertised in a coupla papers. Wants to see the Kingbird real bad!"

"I might as well go and apply for the job," said the young man. "You took me for the Kingbird. Maybe he'll hire me for the same reason?"

The deputy chuckled.

"Yeah, and maybe he would,"

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said he. "I dunno. He's down at the hotel, I guess. Go try your luck."

STILL laughing, he rode on up the street, and the Kingbird walked slowly on, leading his tired horse. He himself was not tired. He had performed enough in the past five or six days to exhaust a corporal's squad, but yet even the very surface of his strength had not been rubbed away. He had grown lean and battle-worn, but the great well of nervous energy inside him had not been even tapped as yet.

In the twilight, he paused beside the veranda of the hotel, and saw a man walking slowly up and down, the boards squeaking a little under his feet.

"Is there a Mr. Kinney around here?" he asked.

The other stopped pacing and came to the edge of the veranda.

"I'm Kinney," said he.

He was a formidable-looking man, more than middle size, with a great, leonine head on his broad shoulders.

The Kingbird looked him over with an intense interest.

"*D'you want me?*" snapped Kinney.

"You want *me*, I hear," said the young man.

"Who are you?"

"The 'Kingbird,' some people call me."

The other jumped down from the edge of the veranda. As he came close, he said:

"You're too small to be the Kingbird, my friend."

"I'm the Kingbird," said the young man.

"You're too small, and too young, in spite of the hair on your face."

"All right," said the young man. "You don't want me, then?"

"I want some sort of proof," said Kinney. "I can't afford to talk to every Tom, Dick, or Harry, who pretends to be what he isn't."

"What sort of proof do you want?"

"A sight of that famous black mare would be enough."

"She's gone—for the time," said the Kingbird.

"I thought she would be," said Kinney dryly. "What other sort of proof can you offer, my young friend?"

"What sort of a proof do you want—outside of the mare?"

"The Kingbird has a gun that doesn't miss its mark, very often."

"This is a bad light for shooting."

"Yes, but not impossible."

"No, not impossible. Got a silver coin?"

"Want me to cross your palm?" asked Kinney, more dryly than ever.

"It won't be worth much, after I'm through with it," said the young man. "Chuck it up into the air."

"There it is," said Kinney.

He spun a fifty-cent piece high in the air. The Kingbird fired from a gun that dropped out of the air, as it were, and appeared in his hand. The twinkle of the silver coin disappeared at the height of its rise.

"Is that enough?" asked the young man.

Two or three men came to the door of the hotel and looked up and down the street, curious as to the shooting. They saw nothing to catch the eye and turned back again.

"That's not enough," said Kinney.

"What else do you want?"

"I don't know. I wonder if I should take a chance? That was a very pretty shot, after all."

"Wait a minute," said the young man. "I'll give you something else. I'll give you my word that I'm the Kingbird."

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"Ought that go very far with me?" asked Kinney.

"I keep my word clean," said the young man.

"And so does the Kingbird?" asked Kinney.

"He's supposed to," answered the other.

"Is he? Yes, and I think that I've heard that, too."

"What do you want of me?" asked the young man.

"Come inside, to my room."

"I'll stay out here. Inside rooms are not good for my health. Not even up here in a mountain town."

"Why not?"

"There's a price on me."

"I forgot that, for the moment."

"What do you want with me?"

"I want a piece of work from you."

"What sort?"

"I suppose you know that my son has been stolen?"

"I've heard that."

"You've heard that the robbers want a hundred thousand dollars from me?"

"Yes, I've heard that, too."

"I would pay a good many thousand to any extraneous agency that could bring the boy back to me. What would your price be for attempting the job?"

"I don't know. Depends on what I had to do."

"What would you want for a down payment?"

"Nothing, because I'd collect after I did the work."

KINNEY chuckled. "I begin to think that you're the Kingbird, without a bit of doubt," said he. "I believe that he has somewhat this air."

"If I go after the boy," said the Kingbird, "I may scare them into doing him harm."

"Something has to be done," said Kinney.

"Why not pay them the money?"

"Pay blackmail?"

"Pay the price on your boy's head."

"Never while I'm in my right mind."

"Why not? You're rich."

"Because I won't gratify the cowardly scoundrels! I won't pay out honest money to thieves."

"You'd pay me, and I'm an outlaw."

"What are you trying to do, man?" asked Kinney. "Badger me?"

"I'm trying to find out how your mind works, and that's all, because this is the second son that you've lost. You let the first one go without even lifting a hand to get him back."

"That's not true," said Kinney. "I offered a reward that's still standing."

"You blocked him from home," said the Kingbird. "He knew that he couldn't come back without making a dog of himself."

"What?" exclaimed Kinney.

"Without apologizing to you," said the Kingbird. "He wouldn't do that!"

"How do you know that?" asked Kinney, starting.

"I knew Jimmy Kinney," said the Kingbird. "I knew him well. He's told me everything that passed between you and him."

"The devil he did!" muttered Kinney. "My friend, this is a very strange story. Do you know what became of him?"

"He's alive," said the Kingbird. "He's alive and well. And he's farther than ever from coming back to you."

"Alive? Thank Heaven!" murmured Kinney. "Young man, if

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you could get word to him that the necessity for any apology is gone—if he'll return——"

"That's not the only thing," said the Kingbird. "There'd be the same story all over again. You've got to be the tyrant. Everybody in your family has to jump when you snap the whip, and Jimmy won't stand it. You've seen the last of him, I think."

Kinney drew in an angry breath. Then he said, in a hard voice: "You speak freely. Very well, we drop the question of Jimmy—for the present. We speak about the other boy."

"Does he mean more to you?"

"We've talked enough about me," snapped Kinney. "We'll be strictly businesslike in the rest of this affair. I want to know if you'll undertake the search?"

"I have another job on my hands," said the Kingbird. "It's a trailing job, too, and I've been beaten at it, so far. When I finish that, I'll take on the other. I'm sorry for the poor little cross-eyed youngster."

"Who told you that—— No, but the descriptions don't say that of him," said Kinney. "That's been remedied by operation. How did you know that his eyes were crossed at one time?"

"Jimmy used to tell me about him."

"He did?" Kinney sighed.

"He did," said the Kingbird.

"He was jealous of my second son?" asked Kinney.

"Jealous? No, he thought a lot of the youngster. In fact, he still does."

"I thought——" exclaimed Kinney, and then checked himself.

"You thought that was why he moved out, eh?" asked the Kingbird. "You're wrong."

"My friend," said Kinney, "will you tell me what Jimmy is doing now?"

"He's on my side of the fence."

"Outlawed?"

"Yes."

"But under another name?"

"Yes."

Kinney turned away and walked several paces back and forth. The dusk was thickening.

"God be kind to him!" he muttered at last. Then, in a different voice:

"But there has to be one master in every household."

"Why do there have to be any masters at all?" asked the Kingbird.

"That's exactly as Jimmy would speak," said Kinney angrily. "Let him go, for the minute. We're speaking of my second boy. You say that you have another trail that you're following. Will you drop that and take up this one?"

"Until I get news of the first trail, I might try my hand."

"Good! I think that you might do something. I don't know why I feel confidence in you."

"Thanks," said the Kingbird shortly. "Can you give me anything to work on?"

"I'm reasonably sure that they're near this place," said Kinney. "They sent me orders to come here with the money."

"Did you bring it?"

"Yes."

"The whole thing?"

"Yes, and more."

The Kingbird whistled.

"A neat little pile of money to be in Elmira," said he.

"Now, then," said the older man, "I'm reasonably sure, also, that since I've arrived, I'll receive word as to how I'm to pay the money—where I'm to leave it—something like that."

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"Perhaps," agreed the Kingbird. "If I get such a word, I could let you know about it, and you might work with me."

"That's true."

"If they attempt to get to my room in the hotel, you might be watching that."

"I could."

"And if I can get my boy back, safe and sound, and bring some of them to justice, I'll spend more than the sum they ask. You understand?"

"Tell me why you brought the coin—when you'd made up your mind not to pay blackmail?"

"I brought it to try my own strength of mind. If I weaken, I have the money ready at hand."

"Good!" said the Kingbird. "I like that idea. Chilled steel is as soft as mud, compared with you, Mr. Kinney. I'll take your job!"

To be continued in next week's issue.

FIRST NEWS OF THE CUSTER MASSACRE

THE recent death of Mrs. George A. Custer, widow of the famous Indian fighter, recalls the tragedy of the Little Big Horn and the strange way in which Mrs. Custer was informed of the massacre and of her husband's death.

Days before the war department received official notice of the disaster, Mrs. Custer had received the death message by "Indian telegraph." The early Westerners knew that the plains Indians had a secret way of communicating over long distances, but to this day no white man has ever been able to understand the system.

On the afternoon of June 25, 1876, the day of the Custer massacre, General George Crook, another famous Indian fighter, at his camp three hundred miles away, was told by his Indian guide that General Custer and all his soldiers had been killed that day. General Crook had great confidence in the Indian, gave his report credence, and dispatched a rider to the nearest railroad station with a telegram for Mrs. Custer. This was the first news to reach the outside world. How the Indian knew of the battle three hundred miles away within three hours after it had been fought, General Crook never knew.

More spectacular, if not so mysterious, was the official report of the massacre. Two days after it had occurred, the steamboat *Far West* was tied up on the Big Horn River, thirty miles from the battlefield. A naked Crow Indian, exhausted from running, tumbled over the river bank and tried to reach the boat. He was helped aboard and revived with whisky. "Absaroke," he kept repeating between gasps. The white men could not make out what he meant, and finally the Indian, seeing some soldiers and spotting a yellow-haired one among them, indicated by sign language that the yellow-haired general and all his troops had been killed. Custer, whose hair was curly and yellow, had once worn it long and was known to the Indians as "Yellow Hair."

The next morning three scouts arrived at the boat and verified the Indian's tale. After the Custer soldiers were buried, the *Far West* covered the eight hundred miles down the river to the nearest telegraph station in half the usual time. But Mrs. Custer knew of the death of her husband several days earlier by means of the Indian telegraph.

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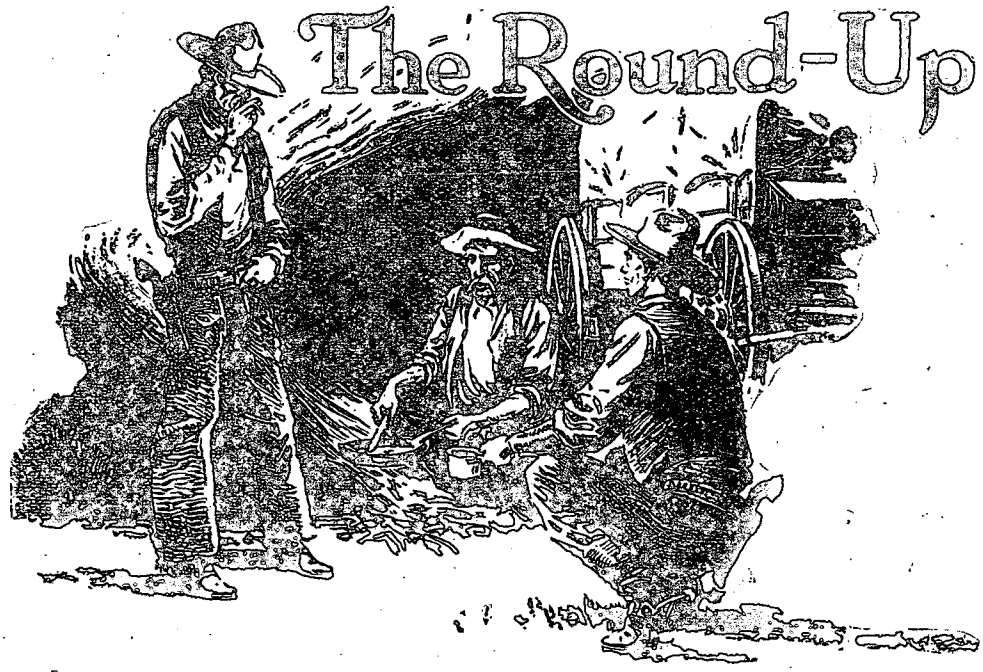

THE complete book-length novel for next week's issue is a real something-extra-cracking-good. It's by an old-time favorite, Kenneth Perkins. The novel is called "Fortune Hunters." There is lots of action, plenty of plot, stirring situations, and fine character drawing. Take it from your old Boss, here's a piece of writing, you just must admit. There's a great collection of short stories, too, by the best authors of the briefer-type yarn. With this announcement we'll step down and listen to some of the boys.

From 'way down in Central America comes F. Markworth. He's got a peg to hang his hat on in Casilla 1330, San José de Costa Rica. Now you tell 'em, Markworth:

"BOSS AND FOLKS: You hit the nail on the head all right with your book-length novel, one serial, and a few short stories. Well, I hope you will always print a serial.

"Now if you should ask me which is your best author, I would tell you that all of them are bricks. A fellow must understand them. Some are best in the woods, others with snow, and still others with cattle and sheep and horses. Sometimes you bring some hunting stories. Well, I'm at home in the woods, fields, on horseback, or hunting, so you see I'm in favor of all your writers."

We are glad that Markworth feels, as do so many of hundreds of thousands of other readers, that we have "hit the nail on the head all right with the book-length novel, one serial, and a few short stories." May every single one of you be of that opinion!

And now for a chat by (Keno) Frank B. Davisson, 8632 South Honore Street, Chicago, Illinois, about the origin of the word, "dogies."

"BOSS OF THE ROUND-UP: In your issue of May 6, 1933, a Mr.

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Paul H. Schmidt asks as to the origin of the word, 'dogie,' which is used to designate runty or undersized yearlings, and right here let me say that where I was drug up, on the North Concho River in western Texas, dogie is right.

"The old-timers there told me that in the '70s and earlier when the southern range was grazed out, a cow outfit landed on the North Concho River below the old Leith Harris ranch, with a herd of mixed cattle, some two thousand or more.

"The cattle looked as if they had never had enough to eat, so when they struck this good grass, they turned them loose. Well, suh, they just ate and ate until they were likely to bust, and the punchers they'd been stuffed with dough, their paunches filled so full from this, they started calling them 'dough guts,' but a puncher won't waste much time on a mouthful like that, so they soon cut it to dogie or dogies—not doggies.

"That, the old-timers told me, was how they were named at that time, and me, I've always been peeved to hear them called doggies. In Texas where, as I say, the term originated, I punched cattle, broke bronc, et cetera, for about twelve years and never heard them called anything but dough guts or dogies.

"Am a reader of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine many years and like it. Starting from San Antone, I trailed from the Rio Grande plumb to the Panhandle on the hurricane deck of a Spanish pony. And the last critter I straddled leaving the —96 Ranch on the Prairie Dog Fork of the Red River was gray Paddy, a little mule."

It's in Bowie, Texas, along on Route No. 3, that Hugh Hill hangs his hat. He's ridin' into the circle to-night to say as how he likes us, and to recite a little poem called "The Glorious Way."

"Boss and Folks. This is just to let you know that good old Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine is read 'way down here on the plains of Texas where you read it to the tune of coyote howls and yearling bawls.

"I'm going to give this old poem, that you can hear recited by some old grizzly for half a mile on clear mornings:

THE GLORIOUS WAY

"Old Bandit Bill" robbed the stage,
And tried to hide out in the sage;
Of course the posse got on his track,
And Old Bandit Bill had forgot his pack.

For days, on the grim posse went,
Out in front their scouts they sent,
Of Old Bill's raiding they'd had enough,
And for Old Bill the posse made it tough.

They pushed Old Bill into the brush,
And at him then they made a rush,
For Old Bill's pony had begun to limp,
And he looked back at the posse with contempt.

They pushed him into Dead Man's Draw,
And there Old Bill got his first taste of law,
Yes, there Old Bill made his last stand,
With a big six-gun in each hairy hand.

For many times to the Lord he did pray,
That a bullet not a rope would get him some day.
And four men with lives to Bill did pay,
As Old Bill went out the glorious way.

Of the ten men there at his last stand,
Four he sent to the promised land,
As they went to the boulder on the hill,
To see what was left of Old Bandit Bill.

They pulled Old Bandit Bill from the saddle,
As people began to gather like cattle,
And with Old Bill four laws they took,
Into the coroner's comfortable nook.

They planted Old Bill it seemed in a cave,
And no tears were wasted over his grave,
But all cow-punchers were glad to say,
That Old Bill went out the glorious way.

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The HOLLOW TREE

Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, will see to it that you will be able to make friends with other readers, though thousands of miles may separate you.

If you would like a friend or friends in a certain section, write Miss Rivers to this effect, and she will put you in touch with readers who want to correspond with folks in your part of the world.

It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

Address: Helen Rivers, care The Hollow Tree, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N.Y.

BELOW the Feather River lands is the famous Mother Lode gold country of California. "Fiddletown Sam" can tell you folks about the diggings—old and new—in this great stomping ground of the forty-niners of the West.

Dear Miss Rivers:

Well, this old-timer who has made so many prospecting trips all over the West and Alaska, too, has decided to come back to his old stomping ground—the famous Mother Lode country of California. I am in the back country on the slopes of the high Sierra Mountains, and this section is very much timbered and still very wild, with here and there an old squatter who has his cabin in a canyon miles from nowhere. I am about in the center of the Mother Lode, being some fifty miles inland from Jackson, the only spot of any size. Jackson is still the center of quite a little mining activity, and has some very deep mines. It was the center in the gold-rush days. Of course there are still many ghost towns scattered along the Mother Lode, also many deserted mines of former days. Many of the old buildings in these towns still stand, and they maintain a post office and grocery store, but let me add that they charge war-time prices, too, for some of these folks still live in mind of the '49 days.

The section I am in at present could not be called a very good spot for a poor man. What I mean by that is this—that this is no place for pan and rocker. It's known as a dry country. Even old-timers who are alive to-day claim that there is not half as much water in the creeks as there used to be. The cause can be accounted for in many ways. Weather changes, for instance; also burned-off watersheds. That causes the water to run off

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quickly, with no moss to hold it. Most of the creeks go dry soon after April, or when snow waters melt. Of course crevicing goes on in pools all summer, but it's been pretty well combed. However, now and then one finds a nugget worth from one dollar to five dollars, but it's rare. The canyons and slopes are covered with tunnels, some of them thousands of feet long, extending back into the cemented gravel on the slate bed rock, overcapped by lime rock, with a lava flow cap. There are also many shafts, hundreds of feet deep, hidden under the manzanita growth. One has to be mighty careful in walking down the slopes.

Some of these old mines would pay to work to-day, and some of the dumps that I have inspected assay about fifteen hundred dollars on the dump, and with the up-to-date mills and in the spring of the year when water is plentiful, that would give good returns. Also the adjacent shafts. You see these diggings were deserted when flour was fifteen dollars a sack and bacon and beans just as high, and in those days these diggings were considered too low grade to work. Then, too, the old mining ways, with stamp mills, took plenty of water, and ditches can be seen running around slopes for miles and miles to many a dry digging. But these diggings are badly in need of repair, and miles of wooden flume have rotted away. You can go into these shafts—and sometimes they are only twenty-five feet deep—and follow the ledge down and chip off real good-sized chunks of gold-bearing rock from the hanging wall, also the foot wall, that can be plainly seen without glass, and all free milling. You can go almost anywhere for miles over this country and follow ledges outcropping everywhere. One does not have to hunt very long to find a ledge, but it takes capital to develop hard-rock mining.

This country is also covered with once-rich placers. In the olden days placer was very rich along the streams, and not far from my cabin, in a canyon below me about fifteen hundred feet, there used to be a city of twelve hundred people. Forest fires have taken everything, and all that remains are the rock foundations and chimneys. Many towns like this are scattered in all the canyons.

The real extent or area of the California Mother Lode—so called because of its rich, gold-bearing veins which supplied the rich placers to the streams—could possibly be traced through the following counties: Nevada, Placer, Eldorado, Amador, Calaveras, Tuolumne, and the northern part of Mariposa. Amador is about the center. Of course the Feather River system and American River systems to the north, in Plumas County, have produced and are still producing gold around the Oroville district and south. In the spring of the year most all these tributaries are scattered with thousands of snippers. But let me add right here that most of them are only averaging fifty cents a day. And not by pan, but with up-to-date sluices. If you can't live on that, don't get any false idea that you are going to strike a mint, because these California rivers and streams all along the Mother Lode south are pretty well peopled in summer.

Gold was discovered in California on January 24, 1848, and was at its prime in '49 and '52. Since then it's been a strike now and then, but most of the streams were pretty well combed years ago by the Chinaman, and every prospector knows that no better man ever worked a rocker or cradle than a Chinaman!

Well, folks, I've been busy digging out a ditch not used since '49 days, and sluicing out a dry gulch here that shows up good in color. But I sure will try to find the time to answer you folks who are interested in this game of prospectin'. An' don't forget your stamped envelopes, folks, with your return address on it.

FIDDLETOWN SAM.

Care of The Tree.

Fiddletown Sam is back again, folks, and here's your chance to hear about the famous Mother Lode gold country of California. Wear your friend-maker membership badges, folks, and speak right up pronto.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to The Hollow Tree Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering, be sure to state which you wish.

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An Idaho miss is here to yarn with you, girls.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am seventeen years old, and I live on a small ranch where it is often rather lonely. I would like to hear from young folks all over the world, especially those living in Mexico and Hawaii. I will be glad to tell all about northern Idaho to any one seeking information.

EDNA LEE PATTON.

Cocolalla, Idaho.

Here are three Pennsylvanians who want to hear from the West.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

We are three boys, all interested in the West, and we expect to get there in the near future. We would like to hear from prospectors, young and old, amateurs or old-timers, and also any one from the West.

RAYMOND TROXEL, GEORGE TEMPLIN, ELMER REED.

2434 Guilford Street,
Lebanon, Pennsylvania.

Stamp collectors, this will interest you.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I would like to hear from stamp collectors or any one who would like to exchange stamps. I have several thousands of foreign stamps that I would be glad to exchange for United States stamps, old or new. I would also like to have several Pen Pals to write to me. I live on a dairy farm of two hundred and sixty-five acres. I'll tell more about the farm if any one wishes me to write. DONALD MINSTER.

Box 86, Davenport Center,
New York.

This Kansan is urging you folks to speak right up.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I have carried Western Story Magazine to many ranches and construction camps in Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, and California. I also took it with me when packing in the mountains, and it sure goes good with the winter days, especially on the ranches. I have left more than one copy behind for others to enjoy.

Well, folks, I would like to hear from you-all and exchange some snaps.

ED BENEDICT.

2949 Main Street,
Kansas City, Missouri.

An old cow-puncher wants to swap yarns with you, folks.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Will you let an old cow-puncher join The Hollow Tree? It is lonely out here with no company but the dogies and the coyotes. I want every one who reads this to write me. Yes, folks, I need a letter from you-all to cheer me up. And I will tell about cotton and cattle if you want me to. GEORGE SIMMONS.

Care of Simmons Ranch,
Hedley, Texas.

From Missouri comes this middle-aged lady.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a lonely middle-aged lady, living in the beautiful Ozark country of Missouri. I have lived in Florida, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Kansas, and I have traveled from Kansas to Florida and from Oklahoma to the Pacific coast and back. I would like to find some Pen friends in the Northwest, West, and Southwest. Who will write first? MRS. R. B.

Box 364, St. James, Missouri.

Pards, here is your chance to do some placer mining.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a mining prospector and have some good placer ground in view for this summer. Of course I could not promise a fortune out of it, but at least there is good fishing and some of the best scenery in the world! And it is out of the way of the general public.

Now I want to get in touch with a young couple about my own age—twenty-seven—who like outdoor life and have money enough to grubstake themselves. If they don't mind the snow, they can stay on during the winter. There is good hunting in winter and not much trouble to build a good cabin, for there is plenty of timber. There are several old-timers in there who make a good living washing gravel, and we ought to make something. I don't like to go in there by myself, for it gets too lonely to suit me. I don't care whether my pards know anything about mining or not, for I have the experience, and it is not very difficult to catch onto the game.

Well, pards, when do we start?

A. J. J., OF CALIFORNIA.

Care of The Tree.

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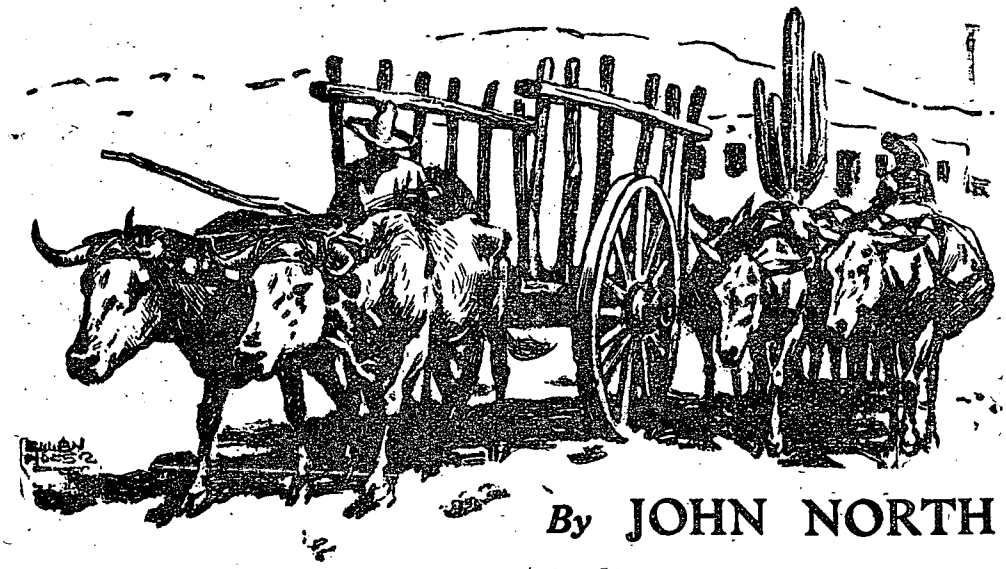

By JOHN NORTH

WHERE TO GO and How to GET THERE

We aim in this department to give practical help to readers. The service offered includes accurate information about the West, its ranches, mines, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. We will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to us, for we are always glad to assist you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

THERE has been of late a great urge in men to return to the soil. The city has lost its fascination for many, who are turning to the land to find renewal in the primitive life, in growing things, the out-of-doors. Abandoned farms are being retenanted; there is increased interest in homesteading. Much unappropriated homestead land is still available in the United States. The State of New Mexico, for instance, giving the latest figures procurable, has 13,615,150 acres of unreserved lands.

A hombre living down in that State has some information he feels may be helpful to some one looking for a homestead.

"There are four sections of so-called mesa land near Albuquerque, New Mexico, that are open to entry," writes L. N. Gilliland. "The nearest of these is about fifteen miles from the city and the farthest about twenty. These tracts are easily accessible by automobile all the year, although there are no public roads; they are not what you might call 'snaps' as they are practically worthless for cultivation. Good water may be had within a few miles or drilled for two hundred feet down.

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"I would recommend these lands only to persons looking for a home where they can keep a few cows, chickens, and other live stock, or to some health seeker with a lung ailment, as the climate here is ideal for such diseases.

"The grass on this land is good if sheep are kept off for a year or two, and the surface is mostly level, although there are some rocky portions. However, there is little firewood in the immediate vicinity, althought plenty of lava rock that is very good for building.

"Having homesteaded in this district myself, I am prepared to say that one should not attempt to file on a piece of land of this nature unless he has suitable means of transportation, adequate funds to pay filing fees, build a house and make other improvements, and support himself and family. At the present there is little employment in Albuquerque, and the only chance of making a living would be to produce eggs, rabbits, or perhaps goat's milk. Albuquerque affords a fair market."

We appreciate this information on homesteading in New Mexico from one who knows, and would be glad to have some firsthand facts about homestead lands in other States.

The back-to-nature urge has P. T., of Cleveland, Ohio, in its grip, though nothing more serious than a vacation is taking him out to the Northwest.

"I've heard much about what a marvelous country the Olympic Peninsula in Washington is, Mr. North. A college friend and I are going to drive out and would appreciate it if you could tell us something about it. We want to get in some fishing while there. Could you advise us where?"

So you boys are bound for the Olympic Peninsula out Washington way. This peninsula, bounded by Puget Sound, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and the Pacific Ocean, is a wilderness just being opened up to tourist enjoyment; it borders upon one of the finest dairy and farm countries in the Northwest. The Olympic Mountains form a barrier across the northern end of the peninsula. They shelter canyons of impressive depth, forests that cannot be matched anywhere, glaciers of amazing beauty, and lakes that draw visitors in ever-increasing numbers.

Lake Crescent, in the shadow of Storm King, is just twenty miles from Port Angeles, Washington. Wonderful fishing lasts all year at this secluded lake, which has been likened to the world-renowned lakes of the Austrian mountains. Well-conducted hotel and cottage service, has earned for Lake Crescent summer resorts an enviable place among establishments devoted to the requirements of those seeking out-of-door recreation.

There is frequent boat service for passengers and automobiles between Seattle and Port Townsend and Port Angeles, connecting with the Milwaukee Road at Port Townsend and with automobile stages at both Port Townsend and Port Angeles.

SPECIAL NOTICE

HOMESTEADING IN NEW MEXICO

Are you interested in New Mexico homestead lands near Albuquerque? If you are and would like information additional to that which L. N. Gilliland gives in his letter appearing in this article, he'll be glad to hear from you. Address him in care of John North, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine.

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It is but a six-hour ride by boat, railroad, and auto stage from Seattle to the lake.

Fourteen miles from Lake Crescent is Sol Duc Hot Springs where a comfortable hotel and cottages accommodate those seeking health and scenic inspiration. It lies in a deep green pocket in the mountains. Lake Sutherland, Ozette Lake, Olympic Hot Springs, and other resorts command their quota of recreation seekers, also.

As much may be said for the spot F. D., of Newburgh, New York, has chosen for his vacation.

"I've been advised to spend my holiday this year in the Muskoka Lake district of Ontario, Canada, and I'd like to know as much about it as possible before I make my decision. Just what is its location and what has it to offer the vacationist? I will appreciate any facts you send me."

Well, F. D., the Muskoka Lake region is a lovely one. It's about one hundred miles north of Toronto and, thickly dotted with summer hotels, resorts, cottages, and camps, has long been a favorite summer playground. Splendid rail connection with Toronto and other points and fine motor roads leading to and penetrating the region make it easily accessible. It is a land of lakes and rivers. Eight hundred feet above sea level, it is cool and invigorating.

Three large connected lakes form the main waterways of the region, and there are scores of smaller lakes and pleasant streams which vie in attractiveness with the parent waters. Lake Muskoka, southernmost of the trio, is twenty-one miles long; Rousseau, to the north, has a length of thirteen miles; and Joseph, a companion lake to the west, extends for eighteen miles. There are miles of shore line to explore, nearly five hundred islands to visit.

Canoes glide in and out among these islands. Motor boats and launches speed from point to point or slip leisurely into quiet bays on friendly visits from dock to dock. Here and there one sees a sailboat. In green channels and tree-bordered bays one catches glimpses of the angler delighting in his catch of bass or pickerel. I don't wonder you've been advised to spend your holiday there, F. D.

Here's a city-minded chap, T. G., of Fort Madison, Iowa. He's on his way to Denver, and wants the facts on Colorado's interesting capital.

This city on the South Platte River is the metropolis of the Rocky Mountain region, a health resort, too, and gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park. The automobile trip through this park is a wonderful one, requiring two days and twice crossing the Continental Divide. In early days Denver was the halfway point where westbound caravans rested for the long pull across the divide.

Some of the fine buildings you'll want to see in the heart of this city where gold was once minted, are the United States Mint, State Capitol, Auditorium, State Museum, Colorado Museum of Natural History, and the Federal Building.

A LOG CABIN AND ITS FURNITURE: If you are handy with tools, the editor of this department can tell you how to build a cozy log cabin. He will also be glad to send you an address from which you can obtain directions for making simple furniture for your cabin home. For this information write to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine.

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GUNS AND GUNNERS

By CHARLES E. CHAPEL

Lieutenant, U. S. Marine Corps

The foremost authorities on ballistics and the principal firearms manufacturers are coöperating to make this department a success. We shall be glad to answer your questions regarding firearms of any make or age. Address your letters to Lieutenant Charles E. Chapel, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

AMMUNITION development has closely followed progress in firearm manufacture. The ancient spherical musket bullet was caliber .80; then came the cone-shaped Minie bullet of about .702 caliber used until the close of the Civil War, followed by the caliber .56 Spencer, and the .45 caliber projectile which found popularity until the Spanish-American War. As cross-sectional area decreased, air resistance became less, and this gave the missile more velocity. With decrease in diameter came elongation that had the same effect as streamlining the body of a car or airplane.

The eighteenth-century musket was not accurate at more than two hundred yards, and at one point in that range the bullet rose thirty feet above the imaginary line from the gun to the target. The Spencer, caliber .56 of 1860 had an effective distance of two hundred yards, but the highest point in the trajectory of the bullet was twenty-two feet. The maximum height of the U. S. .45-70, used from 1870 to 1880, was down to thirteen feet; the Winchester .45-90 dropped to eleven and nine tenths feet, and to-day we have the U. S. Rifle, Model of 1903, with a trajectory so flat that any one standing at any point on the line from gun to target, up to seven hundred yards, would be in danger. What does this flattening of trajectory mean? Simply this, a flat trajectory increases the probability of making hits when the range has

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been wrongly estimated, or the sights set improperly.

Bannerman helps our gun fans.

P. C. Babcock, Coronado, California: It is true that one of the best references on antique arms is the Bannerman catalogue, but if there are any readers who cannot afford to buy that publication, we have arranged to secure for them the regular Bannerman ten-cent, twenty-page, illustrated pamphlet, free. However, it is expected that they will inclose the usual three-cent stamp, although we have never failed to assist readers simply because they lacked postage.

Danish arms.

O. Q. Wester, Council Bluffs, Nebraska: During the World War, Denmark was neutral, but her soldiers were equipped with the Model 1889 Krag-Jorgensen, 8 mm.—corresponding to our caliber .315—using five cartridges to the magazine box, weight with bayonet, nine pounds, ten ounces. The cartridge weight was 460 grains, and the muzzle velocity was 1968 feet per second.

Trench knives.

F. R. Tyson, Orlando, Florida: There are two models of U. S. army, World War, trench knives. The Model 1917 has a knobbed handle and a triangular-shaped blade, while the Model 1918 has a large brass handle that resembles a set of brass knuckles—and could be so used—and a seven-inch blade, one inch wide, with ridges in the center. The Model 1918 usually comes with a scabbard and is worth more as a relic than the Model 1917.

Automatic vs. revolvers again.

L. F. Matthews, Bremerton, Washington: A national authority on police weapons recently asked us not to mention his name, but was pleased to offer his advice: "Automatic pistols would be best for police and sheriffs if they would learn how to clean and shoot them, but it is foolish to put good tools in careless or ignorant hands, and therefore I recommend the revolver for most peace officers." This is certainly not meant as an adverse criticism of the police, but it does emphasize the need for teaching care, cleaning, and marksmanship to our guardians of life and property. Any ignorance or carelessness on their part is the fault of the taxpayers who neglect to appropriate money for police pistol practice.

Salute Scalfo.

This week we salute Mr. Louis Scalfo, Passaic, New Jersey, druggist, who is reported to us as having driven two robbers out of his store in jig time by opening up with his trusty sidearm. We have need for men like Scalfo in this country.

Bravo for Button!

Here's a telegram telling us of another courageous shooter! Bank President C. A. Button, Security State Bank, Woodland, Washington, recently shot a thief running away with several thousand dollars, and not only seriously wounded his quarry, but recovered the cash for the bank. Bravo for Mr. Button!

Among the most nimble and graceful animals in the world are the Rocky Mountain sheep.

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MISSING

This department is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

BELLFIELD, EARL.—Was last heard from in 1917. At that time he was in Portland, Oregon. He has light hair and blue eyes. Is five feet six inches tall. Would be now forty-three years of age. Is supposed to have served in the World War. Information as to his whereabouts will be gratefully received by his brother. Address Ray Bellfield, R. 1, Sequim, Washington.

GEORGE.—If you remember July 10, 1929, at Beausijour, please write to me in care of this magazine. Doris.

ATTENTION.—Will members of Company C, Machine Gun Battalion, A. E. F., please write at once to Thelba Housler, R. F. D. 2, Emporium, Pennsylvania.

AULT.—Would appreciate information concerning the Ault family of Williamsport, Pennsylvania. All postage will be returned to sender. Please address Melicina Ault, Box 52, Delores, Colorado.

ATTENTION.—Would like to find relatives of my mother, Lillie J. Hall. She died when I was between two and four years of age. I am fifty-five years old. If I ever heard my mother's maiden name, I have forgotten it. It is probable that I never knew it, as my father never spoke of her people. He was W. S. Hall, and in the early 1870's he drove four thousand head of cattle from Atcosa County, Texas, to Wichita, Kansas, where he sold them. He met my mother there, a young widow at the time. She was living with her uncle, Gray by name. By marriage her name was Meredith, but she played in a vaudeville act under the name of Gray. Later my father met her again in New York City and they were married by a Congregational minister at the home of W. C. Nash. Mr. Nash owned a packing house near my father's at Lockport, Texas. Father and his brother established the first packing house in Texas in 1860. Father brought my mother to Texas by steamer after their marriage, and they landed at old Indianola, Texas. From there they went to Lockport, where father had a packing plant. Every year he slaughtered thousands of cattle. I would like very much to learn something of the family of my mother, who died too young for me to remember her. She was a Roman Catholic and on her tombstone in the Roman Catholic Cemetery it says: Lily J., wife of W. S. Hall, born July 19, 1853. Died August 1, 1881. If any of the reader can help me locate any of her relatives, or give me any information concerning them, I shall be most grateful. Address Frank Hall, 509 Highland Boulevard, San Antonio, Texas.

WALLACE, WILLIAM E.—He is sixty-two years old, but looks much younger, being always very quick of movement. Is five feet seven inches tall, weighs one hundred and thirty pounds. Eyes are blue. Has high cheek bones and no teeth. Hair is gray. Wears it combed pompadour. He is a cook by trade. When last seen, on March 18, 1938, he was wearing blue serge suit, large black hat, and tan shoes. Any one seeing him, please let him know that his wife is heartbroken at his absence and wants him back regardless of everything. Address Mr. W. E. Wallace, 2518 East Third Street, Topeka, Kansas.

REEVES, DANIEL V.—Frequently known as Garbel. Eddie McD. and I have searched constantly for you since 1925. Interests same as in 1922. If you see this, please write, care of this magazine. He is Jewish. Has brown curly hair and hazel eyes. He is five feet nine inches tall and of stocky build. Would be about forty years of age. Is well educated and has charming personality. Makes friends readily, particularly among men. He is especially interested in horse racing and cards. It is possible that he may be either in cigar business or working as a salesman. Served in the World War. Was last heard from in 1935. At that time he was in California. Because of difficulties he may have changed his name. Home was on Drexel Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. Any help from the readers in locating him will be deeply appreciated. Write to F. B. N., care of Western Story Magazine.

SMITH, RALPH V.—Who left Biggs, Butte County, California, about four years ago. Any news regarding him, or his present address, will be gratefully received by his mother, Mrs. W. E. Smith, P. O. Box 1225, Carmel, California.

FORD or NATION, EVELYN.—Whose mother was Vera Nation Ford. She was last heard of near Guymon, Oklahoma, in 1916. She would now be about nineteen years of age. Evelyn, if you see this, please write at once. Any one having the address of this young lady, please send same to Bill, care of this magazine.

NAPSTAD, WALTER.—In 1918 he was heard from in Canada, at the time of his father's death. Has not been heard from since. He is about twenty-five years of age. Any one knowing his present whereabouts, kindly communicate with Alice Napstad, Madison, Wisconsin.

POLK, LAURA ALICE.—She is my sister, and I am trying to locate her. Twenty-seven years ago she married Groner Cecil Pruitt or Prewett. I am not sure of the spelling. A son, Groner C., Jr., was born in October, 1907. Any information concerning either my sister or nephew will be sincerely appreciated by Mrs. Kathleen Jones, Box 152, Sallisaw, Michigan.

NOTICE.—I was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1894. When a small child I was placed in the German Roman Catholic Orphan's Home in that city. In 1899 I was adopted by Robert and Mary Zastrow. My own parents were Louis and Jeanette Ross. My mother's maiden name was Jeanette Ganraw. Any information regarding relatives on either side will be gratefully received. Address Francis Zastrow, Beaverton, Oregon.

O'TOOLE, JOHN.—Answers to nickname of Jericho. Was born in Clinton, Massachusetts, 1908. Is six feet tall and weighs one hundred and seventy-five pounds. Hair is dark and wavy. Conspicuous by a peculiar laugh. Was last heard from in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Will he, or any one knowing his whereabouts, kindly write to the undersigned, as his parents and friends are anxious to know if he is still living. Annie Gannon, care Doctor C. Grady, 49 High Street, Clinton, Massachusetts.

PROBST, MISS BARBARA.—She was last seen in 1923 at Mattoon, Wisconsin. In 1895 she was in St. Louis, Missouri, and has not been heard from since. She would now be thirty-eight years of age. Any information concerning her will be gratefully received by her worried mother. Address Mrs. Frank Probst, Box 265, Mattoon, Wisconsin.

DONEGAN, ALFRED.—He is the son of Samuel and Ella Moore Donegan, and was born about 1871 at, or near, Huntsville, Alabama. Was sent to Brunn, Austria, as special envoy about 1907. He married in Austria and returned to the United States, settling in Alabama. He was a nephew of the Honorable Alfred Moore, who was at one time mayor of Huntsville. Any one having any information as to his whereabouts, please communicate with his cousin, Mrs. Daniel L. Killian, Drawer 117, Kendall, Florida.

CROMWELL, BERT.—Was last seen in Butte, Montana. In 1927 he bought a ticket at that place for California. He is five feet ten inches tall. Has gray hair. Is fifty-five years of age. At one time he owned a farm at Trail, Minnesota. Any one knowing his present whereabouts, please notify his niece, Mrs. Myrtle Virant, R. 1, Box 29, Butte, Montana.

HOPKINS, LARRY or TEX.—Was last seen in the Union Bus Terminal on Christmas Eve, 1930. He is about twenty-two. Is six feet tall, dark-complexioned, and has black hair. Has a wide acquaintance in Baltimore and Annapolis, Maryland. Any information will be appreciated. Address Dink, care of Western Story Magazine.

MONTGOMERY, WYLIE.—Was born August 6, 1906, at Centuria, Wisconsin. When four years of age, he was placed in an orphanage at Sparta, Wisconsin. His half brother is trying to find him, but has been unable to trace him after that time. His father is seriously ill and in a hospital. Any one who can offer any information regarding this young man, kindly write to Archie Montgomery, P. O. Box 478, Chula Vista, California.

PUDGE.—All is forgiven. Every one loves you and prays for you. Please write to us, wherever you are, and let us know how you are getting along. Love. Peggy.

WILLIAM, CLYDE C.—He is tall, fair-complexioned, with black hair and blue eyes. Has picture of a woman tattooed on his left arm. Right arm is also tattooed in various patterns. He is between thirty-four and thirty-five years of age. Just before leaving his last address, he wrote to his sister Ruth, that he intended going to Chicago, Illinois. His mother's maiden name was Addie Davis. His father's name was James P. Williams. He has one brother, Alfred Williams, and three sisters, Mrs. Effie Edwards, Mrs. Lillie Beard, and Mrs. Ruth Blanking. Any news regarding him will be much appreciated by Ethel Tramel, 49 Green Street, Pocolet Mills, South Carolina.

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29x4.75-20	2.25	0.95
29x5.00-19	2.60	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.60	1.05
28x5.25-18	2.65	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.75	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.75	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.95	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.95	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.00-18	2.95	1.15
31x6.00-19	2.95	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.00	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.20	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.20	1.35

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Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3	$1.90	$0.65
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32x4	2.75	0.85
33x4	2.75	0.85
34x4	2.75	0.85
32x4½	2.95	1.15
33x4½	2.95	1.15
34x4½	2.95	1.15
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33x5	3.25	1.45
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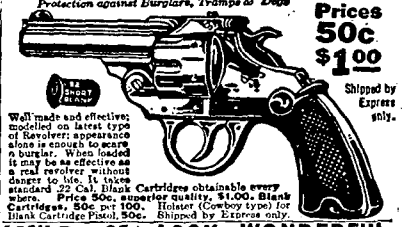

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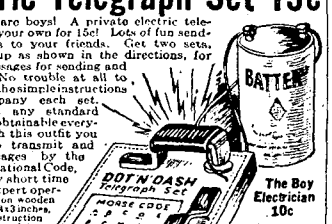

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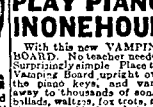

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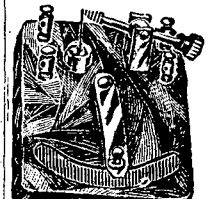

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Greatest boys' book written. Tells how to make a Pinhole Camera, a Canoe, model Railroad, a Telegraph Instrument, Box Kite, Talking Machine, Microscope, Electric Motor, Electric Door Bell, Water Wheel, Paddle Raft, a pair of Skis, a long Sled, Bird House, Rabbit Yard, etc. 64 pages. 150 illustrations. **PRICE 10c.**

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Box contains 12 eggs. When lit with a match, each one gradually hatches itself into a snake several feet long, which curls and twists about in a most life-like manner. **Price per box, 10c postpaid. 3 for 25c.**

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BOOK ON BOATS. How to build rowing, sailing boats. Everything pertaining to boats explained in detail so anyone can understand. Illustrated. **10c p.pd.**

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Withabunch of these bills, it is easy for each person to appear prosperous by flashing a roll of these bills at the proper time and peeling off a genuine bill or two from the outside of the roll, the effect created will be found to be all that can be desired. **Prices, postpaid: 40 Bills 20c, 120 for 50c, or $3.50 thousand postpaid.**

TELL YOUR OWN FORTUNE

With the aid of this dream book and fortune-teller. The key to your future. Will you be lucky in love? Successful in business? Will you be wealthy? Complete with dictionary of dreams with descriptions and correct interpretations, with lucky numbers, fortunate days, oracles, divination, palmistry, etc. **Price 10c p. pd.**

FORTUNE TELLING BY CARDS 64 page book tells how. Gives the meaning of each and every card, how to deal and read them out. Everything explained in simple language. **10c postpaid.**

MICROPHONE TRANSMITTER BUTTON

$1.00 Postpaid

You can easily make a highly sensitive detectophone by using this Transmitter Button to collect the sound waves. You can build your own outfit without buying expensive equipment. It is simple and inexpensive. You can install an outfit in your home and hear conversations being held all over the house. You can connect up different rooms of a hotel. This outfit was used by secret service operatives during the war. It is being used on the stage. It is an ultra-sensitive and is the greatest invention in microphones. You can mount the button almost anywhere—card board boxes, stove pipes, stiff calendars, on the wall behind a picture frame, etc. Button is so light and small it cannot be detected. Persons can be overheard without suspecting it. You can listen in on conversations in another room. A deaf person in the audience can hear the speaker. Connected to phonograph, piano or other musical instrument, music can be heard hundreds of feet away. Button may be used to renew telephone transmitters, often "takes a dead line" "talk up" when other cures will fail. An ideal microphone for radio use, carries heavy current and is extremely sensitive. Amplifier radio signals. Countless other similar uses will suggest themselves. Experimenters find the button useful for hundreds of experiments along the lines of telephones, amplifiers, loud speakers, etc. Many fascinating stunts may be devised, such as holding the button against the throat or chest to reproduce speech without sound waves. **PRICE $1.00.**

PERFORMING SKELETON

10c ppd.

A jointed figure of a skeleton 14 in. in height, will dance to music and perform various gyrations and movements while the operator may be some distance from it. **Price 10c. 3 for 25c ppd.**

HOW TO PITCH. Book contains lessons by leading pitchers, with illustrations. Instructive. 56 illustrations. **25c postpaid.**

ANARCHIST BOMBS

One of these glass vials dropped in a room full of people will cause more consternation than a limburger cheese. The smell entirely disappears in a short time. **10c, per Box, 3 Boxes for 25c., 75c per doz. Boxes, or $7.50 per gross Boxes.** Shipped by Express. Not Prepaid.

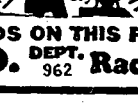
SNEEZING POWDER

Place a very small amount of this powder on the back of your hand and blow it into the air, and watch them sneeze without knowing the reason why. It is most amazing to hear their remarks, as they never suspect the real source, but think they have caught it one from another. Before the laughing and sneezing you yourself will be having the time of your life. *For parties, political meetings, car rides, or any place at all where there is a gathering of people, it is the greatest joke out.* **PRICE 10c, 3 for 25c, 75c per dozen. Shipped by Express.** *Not Prepaid. 240 page Novelty Catalog 10c.*

COMICAL MOTTO RINGS

Lots of harmless fun and amusement wearing these rings. Made in platinoid finish (so resembles platinum), with wording on enameled, as illustrated. **Price 25c ea. Postpaid.**

MAGIC MADE EASY 250 MAGIC TRICKS



An excellent little book containing 250 Parlor Tricks, tricks with cards, coins, handkerchiefs, eggs, rings, glasses, etc. So simple that a child can perform them. Profusely illus. Sent postpd. to any address for only **10c. 3 copies for 25c postpaid**

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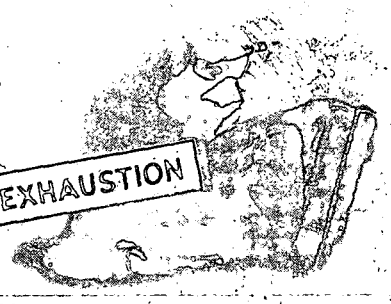
This Little Gland Robbed Me of Sleep and Health



Until I Discovered a New Hygiene for Men Past 40

IT had been coming on for years—this devilish thing called "Prostate Trouble!" I gave it little thought at first, because I figured that all men experience a certain change about my time in life. That was my big mistake. I thought it was *just* the breakdown of oncoming age and that I would have to put up with it. I did for a while, but a year later, my condition went from bad to worse at an alarming rate.

These Common Symptoms

My sleep was broken a dozen times every night. In fact, one hour's fitful sleep was a luxury. Pains had developed in my back and legs, and I was chronically constipated. I was run down in body and almost broken in mind—practically an invalid at 58. I talked to scores of men. In fact, I talked to practically every man I met or could get to listen. As I look back now I think I was practically insane on the subject.

Faces Surgery

It has been my experience that a majority of men past 60—and a surprising number even at 40—had one of these distressing symptoms, but few men had it as bad as I did. I had seen my doctor, of course, [illegible] lief. I spent hundreds of dollars in an effort to avoid an operation, for I had learned that gland surgery was usually dangerous. This insidious little gland that robbed me of sleep and health now threatened my very life.

The Turning Point

Then I read one of your advertisements. I admit I mailed the coupon without the slightest hope. There probably never was a more skeptical mind than mine. But this simple little act turned out to be the biggest thing in my life.

I can never thank you enough. I am now sixty. I can go to bed at ten o'clock and sleep straight through. My doctor says he never expected to see me so well. My entire body is toned up, and I feel almost like a youngster. I have had no return of the symptoms, and now use your pleasant treatment just fifteen minutes a day, occasionally, just to make sure that I keep my perfect health.

Millions Make This Mistake

When I was at my lowest ebb, I encountered so many prostate sufferers that I know there must be millions of men doctoring for sciatica, pains in the back and legs, bladder and kidney weakness, chronic constipation, loss of physical and mental capacity and a host of supposed old age symptoms, *who should probably be treating the prostate gland!* In fact, I learned not long ago that certain medical author- [illegible] past the age of 50 suffer from disorders of this vital gland.

My advice to these men is, not to make the mistake that I made. Send the coupon for that little book, "Why Many Men Are Old at 40." Find out the facts about this little gland, which the book contains: It explains in non-technical language a new home-hygiene—*explains how*, without drugs or surgery, without massage, diet, or exercise, this method acts to reduce the congestion and combat the dangerous symptoms.

Illustrated Book Sent Free

See if these facts apply to you. Learn the true meaning of these common complaints and see why these ailments in men past 40 are so often directly traceable to a swollen prostate. The book, "Why Many Men Are Old at 40" is sent without cost and without obligation.

Simply mail the coupon to W. J. Kirk, President, The Electro Thermal Co., 7668 Morris Ave., Steubenville, Ohio.

If you live West of the Rockies, address The Electro Thermal Co., 500 Wm. Fox Building, Dept. 76-Y, Los Angeles, Calif. In Canada, address The Electro Thermal Co., Desk 76-Y, 53 Yonge St., Toronto, Can.

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Please mail me at once your Free booklet, "Why Many Men Are Old at 40," and full details about the new home treatment. I am not obligated in any way.

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